

Towards a Gender-Responsive and Resilient Informal Food Sector in Urban Northern Namibia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused severe disruption to Namibia's vibrant urban informal economy. This paper examines the impact of the pandemic on the informal food sector in northern Namibia, with a focus on the towns of Oshakati, Ondangwa, and Ongwediva. The data come from a survey of 250 informal food vendors (200 women and 50 men) who were operating in the region's municipal open markets before the crisis. The paper shows that although both women and men were affected, the women traders who dominate informal food vending had to absorb the most severe economic shocks. Although traders deployed varied adaptive strategies, these tactics produced only partial and uneven post-pandemic recoveries. Our findings confirm that the impacts of the pandemic were not gender neutral. Women-owned businesses were more severely affected than those owned by men, with higher rates of decline in customers and sales, as well as supply chain disruptions. Economic pressure was exacerbated by a major increase in women's unpaid domestic labour, including childcare, cooking, and care for the sick and elderly. Most informal traders, both women and men, were excluded from government pandemic business support mechanisms, slowing their post-pandemic recovery. The paper summarizes and endorses recent post-pandemic national government policy measures to change the policy environment and provide greater support for the informal economy. If implemented at the municipal level, the new policy framework would make a significant break with past punitive approaches and go some way towards a gender-transformative, resilient, and sustainable post-pandemic recovery.

Keywords

Informal food sector, gender inequality, COVID-19 impact, women entrepreneurs, COVID-19, northern Namibia

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Cover Image

Dr. Frans Aupa Indongo Open Market, Oshakati, Namibia. Photo credit: Maria Salamone



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Introduction

In an assessment of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Namibia, the UNDP (2020, p. 43) drew attention to the highly damaging consequences for the country's informal sector, noting that "in the face of a shock such as COVID-19, the importance of evidenced based policy intervention cannot be overstated (and) with regards to the informal sector, it is crucial to undertake a comprehensive diagnostic of it to understand the factors, characteristics, causes and circumstances of informality in Namibia, whose information should be used to design and implement policies, legislation and programmes." While this paper does not provide a "comprehensive diagnostic" of the sort called for, it does provide empirical support for this position by showing that the shock waves were felt far outside the capital, Windhoek, to the far north of the country. In doing so, it also meets the call for information to design and implement proactive post-pandemic policies in the country's secondary cities that are truly gender-transformative, resilient, and sustainable.

In Namibia, the informal economy contributes 25% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employs 58% of the country's workforce, and is likely to remain the primary source of employment for most workers in the foreseeable future (NISO, 2024; NSA, 2019). The informal economy encompasses a wide range of activities, but food-related enterprises account for over half of the total (Ministry of Labour, 2017). Food enterprises include street food and mobile vending, small-scale food processing, formal and informal market trading, and informal tuck shops. Women occupy a leading position in urban informal food retail, accounting for over two-thirds of participants. Their business activities are therefore essential to the livelihoods of urban households, delivering critical services and food security to their own households and other residents of informal settlements, creating self-employment opportunities, and generating income in both the capital city (Nickanor et al., 2019, 2021, 2023a; Ziwoni et al., 2025) and secondary towns and cities (Kazembe et al., 2021, 2022; Nickanor et al., 2023a). However, the gendered opportunities and challenges specific to the women who feed these Namibian cities have yet to be fully explored by researchers (Ananias et al., 2023).

Despite its socio-economic importance, the informal food sector in Namibia operates in a precarious and unpredictable policy environment. Governance responses to informal food vending have oscillated between indifference and neglect, on the one hand, and punishment and eradication, on the other. Harsh regulatory actions – including evictions, stock confiscation, arrests, and wholesale removal campaigns – are not uncommon (Kazembe et al., 2019; Nakuta, 2021). Confrontations between police and vendors in Namibian cities and towns are common (Meyer, 2024). Urban planners in Namibia have sought to address the challenge by allowing informal food traders to operate but controlling where they can do so. The preferred solution has been the construction of municipal "open" markets and encouraging traders to ply their wares from these serviced sites, a carrot and stick policy known as "informalized containment" (Kazembe et

al., 2019). However, the supply of market stands has not kept pace with the demand. Windhoek, for example, faces a 3,000-stall shortage (Anon, 2025). Consequently, many informal food traders have no choice but to continue to operate on the streets. Clustering together in informal markets is a common strategy to minimize risk of police harassment and action. Informal markets are increasingly recognised as legitimate entities and there are plans to convert them into open markets in some centres (Hiveluah, 2024),

Most of the participants in the Namibian informal food sector are survivalists and highly vulnerable to unanticipated shocks (Crush et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic therefore proved an unprecedented challenge to women and men running informal food businesses on the streets, and in the neighbourhoods and marketplaces of Namibian cities (Chigbu et al., 2024; Matomola, 2023; UNDP, 2020; Venditto et al., 2022). COVID-19 officially arrived in Namibia on 13th March 2020 when the Minister of Health and Social Services announced that two Romanian tourists had tested positive for the virus. Government viewed the pandemic as a national security threat and responded in kind (Shikwambi, 2023). On March 17th, the President declared a state of emergency under Article 26(1) of the Namibian Constitution.

Under the state of emergency at the beginning of the crisis, the national government implemented strict lockdown measures including stay-at-home orders, the closure of schools, services, and businesses, suspension of public gatherings, border closures for non-residents, and comprehensive restrictions on cross-border travel (Amesho et al., 2020; Owusu et al., 2025; Shafuda et al., 2023). Only essential workers were allowed to go out to work, while others were advised to stay at home. Most institutions and service providers, including schools, remained closed, except for essential medical and pharmaceutical services, banks, financial institutions, payment services, medical aid funds, and supply chain operations. Parliamentary sessions were suspended, and bars and markets were shut. These measures were later extended until May 4th. After which, a phased reopening began (Amesho et al., 2020). During 2021, three further lockdowns were imposed as the pandemic surged again. The government did not lift all restrictions until the end of the state of emergency in July 2022.

Public health measures, including lockdowns and mobility restrictions, severely disrupted informal sector business operations, decimating revenues, and exacerbating economic and social precarity (Akuupa & Kandenge, 2021; Chiripanhura, 2022). The restrictions on human movement combined with social distancing caused wholesalers, and formal as well as informal traders, to operate at a reduced capacity or close completely during the COVID-19 lockdown. The closure of these businesses had an especially negative effect on local producers who no longer had a market for their goods. A Parliamentary Committee reported to the National Assembly in September 2022 on the results of its investigation into the impact of the pandemic on Windhoek, Oshakati, and Ongwediva. In the two northern towns, the Committee found that although the open markets had been reopened for business, they were largely empty of vendors who could

not afford to pay rent for stalls and were therefore devoid of customers. Anyone found selling outside the markets on the streets was being fined and had their wares confiscated. The Committee concurred that the COVID-19 pandemic had had a severe negative impact on the economy of Windhoek, Oshakati, and Ongwediva.

In an analysis of the impact of pandemic restrictions on the food system, Viver (2021, p. 85) argues that “the restrictions on human movement combined with social distancing caused wholesalers, and formal as well as informal traders, to operate at a reduced capacity or close down completely during the COVID-19 lockdown”. The closure of these businesses had an especially negative effect on the local producers who no longer had a market for their goods. Women informal vendors not only faced the collapse of their livelihoods but also incurred an increased burden of unpaid care and domestic work (Namupala, 2021; Nickanor et al., 2023b). They also found it difficult to access formal economic stimulus packages and the government’s one-time emergency income grant for workers who had lost their jobs (Orkoh et al., 2024; Venditto & Amupolo, 2025). In turn, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a marked increase in food insecurity in urban Namibia. For example, the proportion of urban households that had often or always been without sufficient food in the previous year increased from 8% in 2017 to 21% in 2021 (Afrobarometer, 2017, 2022).

Given the importance of informal vending in making food accessible to the urban poor, there is a critical need for ongoing and targeted support for women in the informal food sector to enhance resilience and ensure sustainable recovery in the post-pandemic era (Crush et al., 2019). In this context, the main objective of the study was to help build a sustainable, resilient and gender-transformative informal food sector for the recovery of COVID-19 in northern Namibia, by examining the impact of the pandemic on women and men food vendors in the twin cities of Oshakati and Ondangwa (hereafter Oshakati-Ondangwa) and the neighbouring town of Ongwediva.

The Northern Urban Corridor

The research for this study was conducted in the three towns, all of which are strategically located within the Oshana Region of northern Namibia (Figure 1). Oshakati serves as the regional capital of the Oshana Region and is widely recognized as the “commercial centre of the North.” It is situated approximately 713 km northwest of Windhoek, Namibia’s capital, directly on the B1 national road, and about 45 km south of the Angolan border. Ondangwa is a bustling

and rapidly growing town just to the east of Oshakati on the B1 highway and near to the Angolan border. The growth of these towns has been rapid, with a combined population of 120,000 in 2023, up from 35,000 at the time of independence from South Africa in 1991 (Table 1).

The urban food system of northern Namibia is a complex mix of formal and informal retail outlets and short and long-distance supply chains (Kazembe et al., 2022). All the major South African-owned supermarket chains (Pick n Pay, Spar, Shoprite, and Woolworths) have more than one outlet in the study area. Their primary competitors are a Namibian chain, Woermann Brock, and Botswana-based Choppies. The urban corridor has several open food markets that rent stalls to informal food and clothing vendors. The markets are gated structures with services constructed by the local municipalities with stands for monthly rent by vendors (Kazembe et al., 2019). Oshakati has three markets, the largest of which is the Dr Frans Aupa Indongo Open Market (formerly the Omatara Market) with space for up to 500 vendors. Ongwediva Town Council has two open markets (the Ongwediva Open Market and the Wilbard Haindongo Open Market), as does Ondangwa (the ABC Open Market and the Ondangwa Open Market). These markets were designed to provide an alternative to street vending but have not completely replaced it. As a result, there are clusters of vendors at various locations known as informal markets. One such is the Oshakati Mini Market where vendors sell cooked food including kapana and traditional dishes (Sheehama & Singh, 2025).

In addition to the open markets, street vendors are found throughout the corridor, particularly near busy road intersections, transport hubs, and residential areas, offering a variety of food items ranging from traditional dishes to snacks and kapana (grilled meat) (Kazembe et al., 2021; Nickanor et al., 2023a). Fixed structures (including disused shipping containers), known locally as tuck shops or spazas, are small-scale informal grocery shops selling a range of processed and fresh foods as well as soft drinks and household supplies. A pre-pandemic mapping of around 400 food vendors in Oshakati found that 25% operated from open market stalls (Table 2) (Kazembe et al., 2021). Another 18% were street vendors with permanent stalls and a similar number were street vendors with temporary stalls. Smaller numbers operated from their homes, had mobile operations, and ran informal restaurants.

Most of the food vendors were women (81%) and single women made up 70% of all vendors surveyed. The average age of all vendors was 36.5 years, with women on average

Table 1: Population of Oshakati-Ongwediva, 1981-2023

	1981	1991	2001	2011	2023
Oshakati	3,684	21,603	28,255	36,541	58,696
Ongwediva	-	6,197	10,742	20,260	28,000
Ondangwa	1,000	7,926	10,900	22,822	33,777
Total	4,684	35,726	49,897	79,623	120,473

Source: Namibia Statistics Agency Census Reports

Figure 1: Location of Study Site

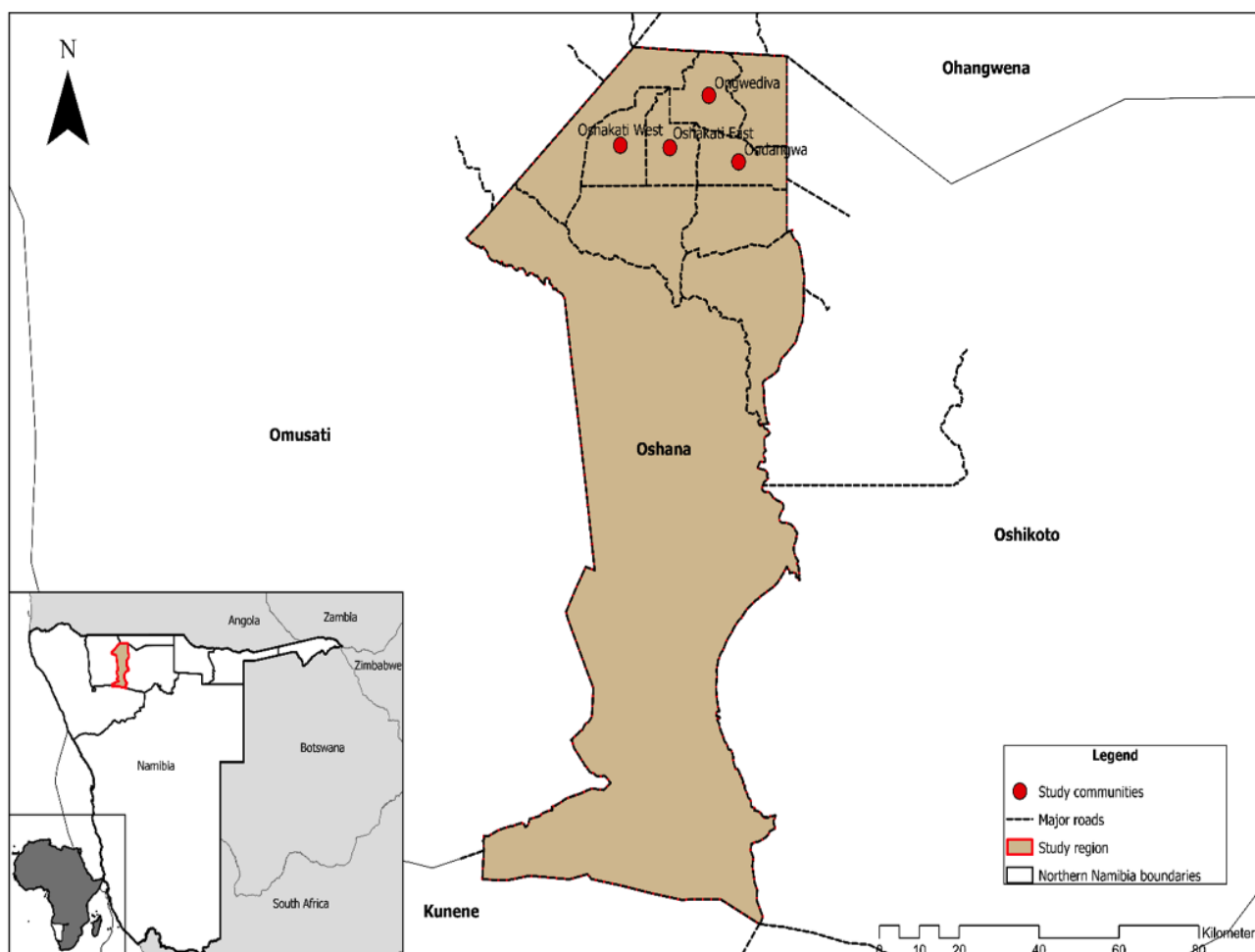


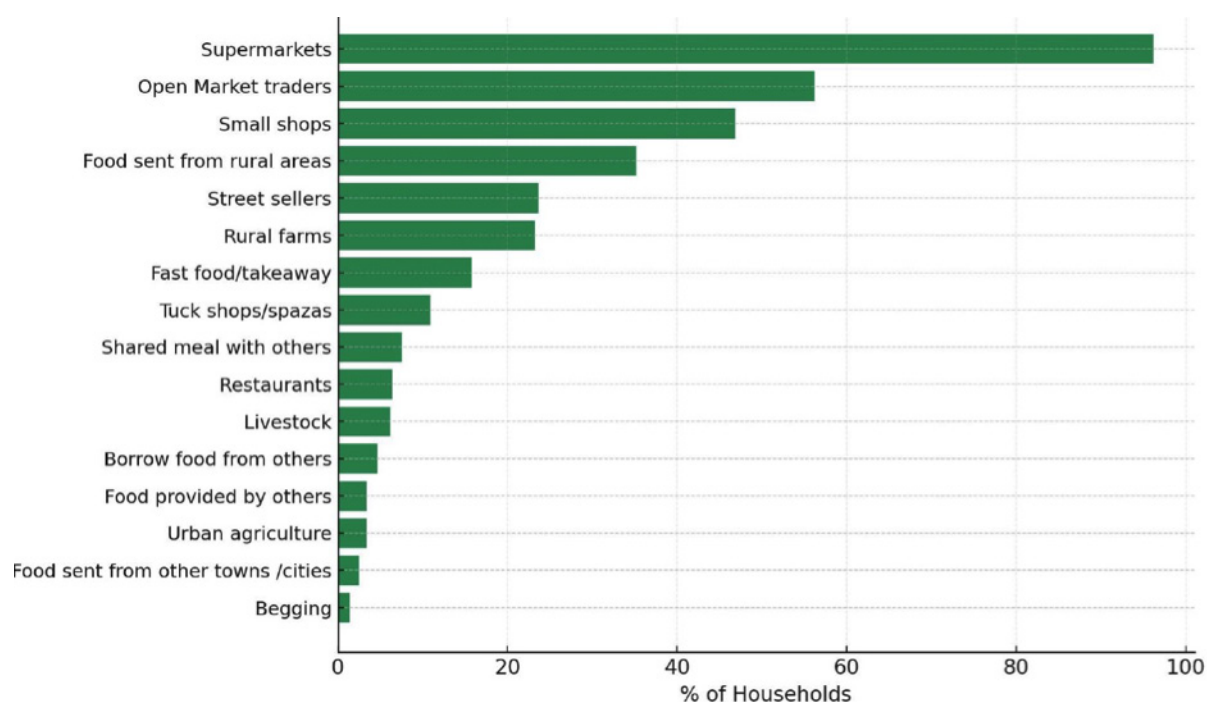
Table 2: Typology of Informal Food Vendors in Oshakati

Location	No. of Vendors	% of Total
Open market vendors	98	24.6
Street vendors with temporary stalls	75	18.8
Street vendors with permanent stalls	73	18.3
At home	64	16.1
Mobile vendors	31	7.8
Restaurant or hotel	18	4.5
In customer homes	9	2.3
Workshop	7	1.8
Vehicle	4	1.0
Other	19	4.8
Total	398	100,0

8 years older than the men. As many as 61% of male vendors were under the age of 35, compared with only 29% of the women. There were also marked gender differences in levels of educational achievement, with 30% of male vendors having no formal education, compared with only 3% of female vendors. Also, nearly 70% of female vendors had secondary education compared to 46% of male vendors. Most food vendors were migrants to Oshakati, mostly from rural areas within the country (63%), followed by those from another urban centre (13%) and another country (5%).

Figure 2 shows that supermarkets were patronised by over 95% of households in Oshakati prior to the pandemic. Small, registered shops (including corner stores, butchers and bakeries) were patronized by 47% of Oshakati households. Informal food vendors patronized in the different locations included open market vendors (56%), street sellers (24%), and spazas/tuck shops (11%). Other food sources of note included food sent from the rural areas, rural agriculture, and fast food.

Figure 2: Patronage of Food Sources by Households in Oshakati



Source: Kazembe et al. (2021)

Methodology

Locations with higher concentrations of informal traders were selected for the Women Feeding Cities survey in 2024-25. Most respondents were operating in the open markets constructed and operated by the Oshakati, Ongwediva, and Ondangwa town councils. The target population for the survey was 200 female (and 50 male) food vendors. They had to have been operational before the COVID-19 pandemic and be sole proprietors or have fewer than five employees. Purposive sampling was employed, where all respondents meeting the inclusion criteria who agreed to participate in the survey were interviewed. The survey was administered on tablets by trained data collectors. The distribution of the respondents by constituency and location is shown in Table 3.

Profile of Informal Food Vendors

Table 4 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents across all the study sites, highlighting notable differences between men and women. Their age profile is very similar, although women are slightly older, suggesting they have a longer engagement in food trading. Most women (75%) and men (84%) are migrants from the rural areas. Educational differences are most striking. Women vendors have higher attainment levels, with most having attended or completed high school and a few attaining tertiary education, compared to men who are more likely to have only primary or no formal education. This educational advantage may enable women to manage their enterprises more effectively and respond better to shocks such as COVID-19. Before starting in food vending, most respondents were unemployed (86% of men and 75% of women). This reflects the limited formal job opportunities for less-

educated migrants and the lack of alternative income-earning opportunities. Women vendors were more likely than men to have transitioned to food vending from other low-paid jobs such as domestic service, farm work, or restaurant/hotel employment (25% of women versus 13% of men). Very few individuals of either sex had previous experience operating an informal business

Table 5 shows the top ten reasons cited by men and women for establishing an informal food vending business (%age saying the given reason was “very important” to them). Both were primarily motivated by economic necessity although notable differences emerge in the areas of personal development and responsibility. The most important reasons for entering the informal food sector were economic necessity. Both women (89%) and men (96%) said unemployment and lack of access to other employment was very important to them as a motivating factor. The goal of securing greater financial stability for their family also featured prominently (79% of women and 78% of men), as did earning additional income for survival (75% of women and 72% of men). In terms of personal growth, the desire to run their own business clearly appealed to most respondents in both groups (86.5% of women and 86% of men). These patterns suggest that economic motivations, coupled with aspirations for independence and family welfare, are central to the decision to engage in food vending.

Despite these similarities, gender-based variations in motivation are also evident. Women placed greater emphasis on factors related to personal autonomy and self-development. A higher proportion of women than men, for example regarded having more control over their time or being their own boss (75% versus 64%), learning new skills (74% versus 68%), and doing something new and challenging (63%

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Sex and Location				
Location	Female		Male	
	No.	%	No.	%
Oshakati Open Market	93	46.5	41	82.0
Ondangwa Open Market	72	36.0	6	12.0
Ongwediva Open Market	17	8.5	0	0.0
Okutopola Open Market (Ondangwa)	6	3.0	2	4.0
Onethindi Open Market (Ondangwa)	3	1.5	0	0.0
Eentokele (Oshakati)	7	3.5	1	2.0
Evululuko (Oshakati)	2	1.0	0	0.0
Total	200	100.0	50	100.0

Table 4: Profile of Informal Food Vendors by Sex (% of respondents)			
Attribute	Category	Women (%)	Men (%)
Age	Youths (<25)	0.0	0.0
	Young adults (25-39)	45.0	50.0
	Adults (40-59)	54.5	50.0
	Elderly (60+)	0.5	0.0
Place of birth	This city	16.0	4.0
	Another city in this country	8.5	8.0
	A rural area in this country	75.0	84.0
	A foreign country	0.5	4.0
Level of education	No formal education	5.0	22.0
	Primary	15.0	20.0
	Secondary	77.0	58.0
	Tertiary	3.0	0.0
Previous job	Unemployed	74.5	86.0
	Domestic worker	7.5	4.0
	Farm worker	5.5	0.0
	Hotel/restaurant worker	5.0	0.0
	Unskilled manual worker	3.0	2.0
	Police/military/security	2.5	6.0
	Office worker	0.5	0.0
	Own non-informal business	0.5	0.0
	Other informal business	0.5	0.0

versus 48%) as very important. This suggests that women's engagement in informal food vending is driven by financial necessity plus the opportunities for autonomy, independence, and even the desire for empowerment. On the other hand, men were more likely than women to cite providing employment for family members (54% versus 38%) and offering jobs to people from their home area (50% versus 33%), possibly a reflection of the gender stereotype that men are household heads and primary breadwinners (Ananias et al., 2023; Tarkkonen, 2017). So, while both men and women are drawn to food vending primarily by economic

necessity and the prospect of self-employment and earning income, their underlying motivations do exhibit gendered nuance. Women's reasons also reflect aspirations for independence, self-improvement, and control over their working lives, whereas men's motivations are more associated with providing employment opportunities for others. In sum, these findings indicate that informal food vending serves as both an economic necessity and a means of empowerment, although interpreted through a different gender lens.

Reason was “very important”	Women (%)	Men (%)
I was unemployed and unable to find a job.	89.0	96.0
I have always wanted to run my own business.	86.5	86.0
I wanted to give my family greater financial security.	79.0	78.0
I wanted to provide food to consumers.	76.5	80.0
I needed more money just to survive.	75.0	72.0
I wanted more control over my time/be my own boss.	75.0	64.0
I like to learn new skills.	74.0	68.0
I wanted to do something new and challenging.	63.0	48.0
I wanted to employ members of my family.	38.0	54.0
I wanted to provide employment for people from my home area.	33.0	50.0

Note: Multiple response question

Profile of Informal Food Enterprises

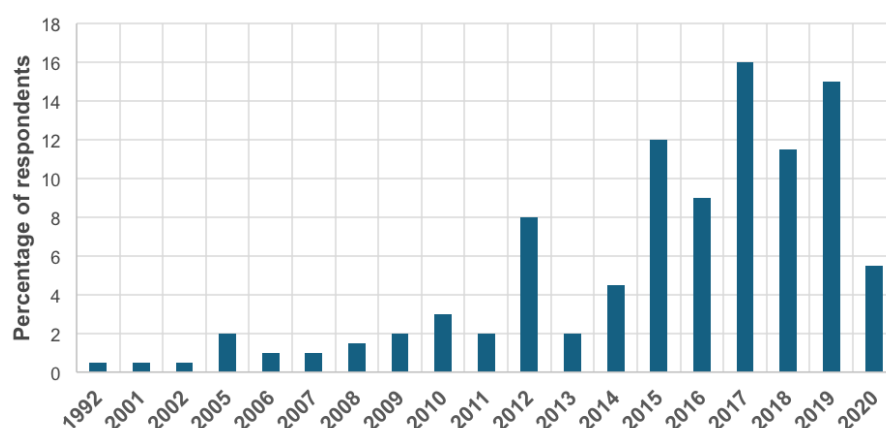
Figure 3 shows that very few of the informal food businesses in the urban corridor were established before the early 2000s. The numbers start to pick up around 2004–2005, with a more significant upward trend from 2009. However, it is only in the years after 2012 that most of the vendors started operating, with the highest percentage in 2017, reaching 16%. Following this peak, there was a sharp decline in 2018, followed by another significant increase in 2019. However, the percentage of new business establishments drops sharply in 2020, likely reflecting the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the filtering question that excluded from the study businesses that were not started before the pandemic. Overall, the data suggests a dynamic and relatively recent growth in the informal food vending sector in Oshakati, Ongwediva and Ondangwa. However, as Table 6 shows, women were somewhat more likely to have begun operating more recently (57% between 2016 and 2020, compared to 46% of men).

A second characteristic of the informal food enterprise concerns the rationale for choosing to locate operations in a particular place, and particularly the reasons for locating in

the open markets. In general, women and men vendors both prioritize the same locational factors (Table 7). Customer access is the main driver behind their location decisions (74% of women and 88% of men), closely followed by access to the services like water and electricity available in the markets (73% of women and 86% of men). Proximity to public transport was equally important for both groups as this ensures more customer foot traffic. more custom as well as ease of transport of goods from source to point of sale. Almost half of the respondents of both sexes said that the legal right to trade in the open markets was important to them as well. Working on the streets exposes vendors to police harassment, which can be avoided simply by locating in an open market.

A majority of both female (62%) and male (64%) food vendors reported that they pay the city for a license to operate their business. This suggests that most vendors are officially registered and comply with municipal regulations. However, there is still a significant minority of 38% of females and 36% of males who do not pay for or cannot afford a licence. The data reflects a high level of compliance with city licensing requirements, though a noticeable number may be working without proper licences, potentially leading to legal

Figure 3: Start-Up Year of Informal Food Vending Enterprises

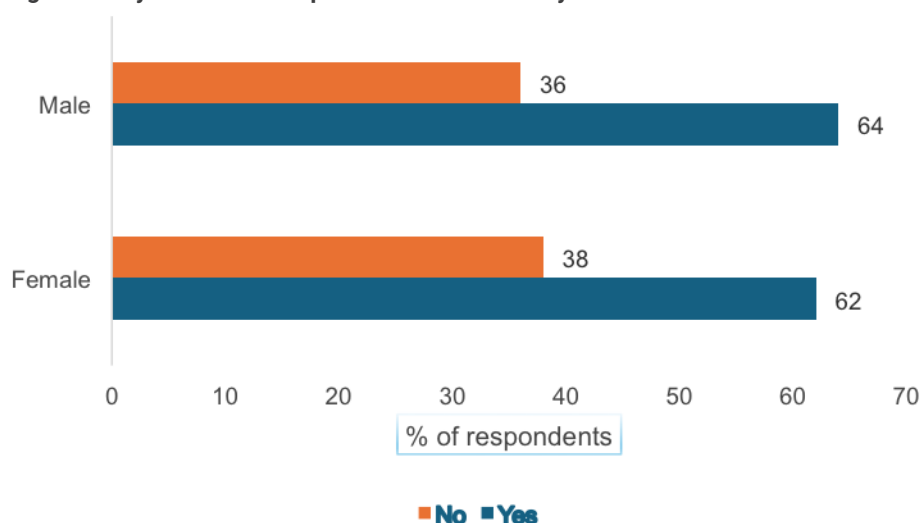


Start-up year range	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
Before 2005	8	4.0	5	10.0
2005-2010	21	10.5	2	4.0
2011-2015	57	28.5	20	40.0
2016-2020	14	57.0	23	46.0
Total	200	100.0	50	100.0

	Women (%)	Men (%)
Place with the greatest number of customers	74.0	88.0
Access to services such as water/electricity	72.5	86.0
Close to public transport	59.5	62.0
Have a permit to operate here	45.0	46.0
Close to other enterprises	41.0	50.0
Rents are cheaper	24.5	32.0
Close to home	22.5	26.0
Always done business there	19.0	18.0
Safer than other locations	16.0	18.0
Due to passing traffic	15.0	10.0

Note: Multiple response question

Figure 4: Payment of Municipal Business Licence by Sex



and operational risks. Finally, also important to the vendors was proximity to other enterprises. Despite the possibility of increased competition, this has at least two positives. Economically, it means that vendors can cooperate on price-setting and not undercut one another. And socially, it provides a more convivial and less solitary work environment.

A third important feature of the informal food sector concerns the sourcing of stock for resale. The survey responses show that most people rely on short supply chains within the urban corridor, especially supermarkets, wholesalers, small shops, and the open markets themselves. Less than 10% obtain their produce directly from rural area farms. Most food vendors source their supplies from supermar-

kets, with 92% of women and 90% of men reporting this as their primary source. This indicates that supermarkets are a critical supplier for food vendors, providing easy access to stock for their businesses. Much of the fresh produce and processed food in supermarkets is imported into the corridor from as far away as South Africa. Vendors purchase from supermarkets and wholesalers in bulk, and then bulk break to sell smaller quantities and make a profit. Cereals are mainly sourced from wholesalers and supermarkets. As many as 58% of women and 70% of men source from wholesalers, suggesting that they are another significant supply channel. The markets themselves are another key source of supplies, which suggests that there may be circulation of goods between the markets in the three towns.

Then there is the question of price-setting in the informal food sector. One of the main advantages for consumers of purchasing from informal vendors rather than supermarkets is price flexibility. As Table 9 shows, women (66%) are somewhat more likely than men (56%) to reward customer loyalty by giving price discounts to their regular customers. On the other hand, 80% of male vendors are willing to negotiate prices with customers, a practice followed by only 57% of women. Men are thus more likely to engage in direct price bargaining, potentially reflecting greater comfort in negotiating prices with customers. However, equal numbers of women and men set their initial prices with a standard mark-up across their stock. Competitive pricing is only deployed by a smaller number (less than 20%), suggesting that cooperation is seen as more important than undercutting others.

COVID-19 Impacts and Coping Strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic had multidimensional impacts on informal food vendors. Overall, the data highlights the gendered nature of the pandemic's economic disruption. Table 10 suggests that women-owned businesses were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. A higher share of women than men reported a decline in customers (86% versus 74%), monthly sales (86% versus 74%), reductions in business hours (77% versus 68%), and disruptions to their supply chains (71% versus 52%). Women were also more likely to experience a drop in the overall value of their business (51% versus 36%) and to be pushed out of business entirely (11% versus 4%). These findings suggest that women food vendors were more vulnerable than men to

Table 8: Sources of Business Stock in the Previous Month

	Women (%)	Men (%)
Supermarkets	92.0	90.0
Formal markets	68.5	76.0
Wholesalers	57.5	70.0
Small shops/retailers	39.5	22.0
Informal sector producers/retailers	16.5	6.0
Direct from farms	6.5	10.0

Note: Multiple response question

Table 9: Strategies for Setting Prices of Food Products Sold

	Women (%)	Men (%)
Give discounts to regular customers	65.5	56.0
Negotiate with customers	57.0	80.0
Set a standard markup across items	56.0	56.0
Keep prices cheaper than competitors	20.0	16.0

Note: Multiple response question

Table 10: Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Informal Business Operations

The pandemic...	Women (% agree)	Men (% agree)
Reduced the number of customers	85.5	74.0
Reduced the monthly sales	86.0	74.0
Reduced my business hours	77.0	68.0
Increased the number of customers buying food on credit	73.0	74.0
Disrupted the supply of goods for my business.	71.0	52.0
Increased the competition from other vendors	58.5	48.0
Increased the cost of supplies and ingredients	53.5	56.0
Reduced the value of my business	51.0	36.0
Forced me to relocate my business	30.0	34.0
Increased the transportation cost of the business	28.0	28.0
Resulted in an increase of rent for my business	23.0	22.0
Pushed me out of business	11.0	4.0
Changed the type of business I operate	8.0	14.0

the combined COVID-19 shocks of movement restrictions, reduced consumer spending, and market closures. Given the central role that informal food vendors play in ensuring affordable food access for urban households in the northern corridor, the economic vulnerability of women vendors posed a wider threat to urban food security and the local food system.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant financial impact on informal food vendors with most experiencing moderate to severe losses in profit. Only 15% of women and 26% of men did not experience a loss and no-one increased their profits (Table 11). Almost 80% of women and two-thirds of men reported a net profit loss of over 20%. For women, average loss was approximately 57%, while men experienced a slightly lower average loss of 55% (Figure 5). Overall, the data underscores the considerable economic vulnerability of food vendors, with nearly half of their profits lost on average due to the pandemic.

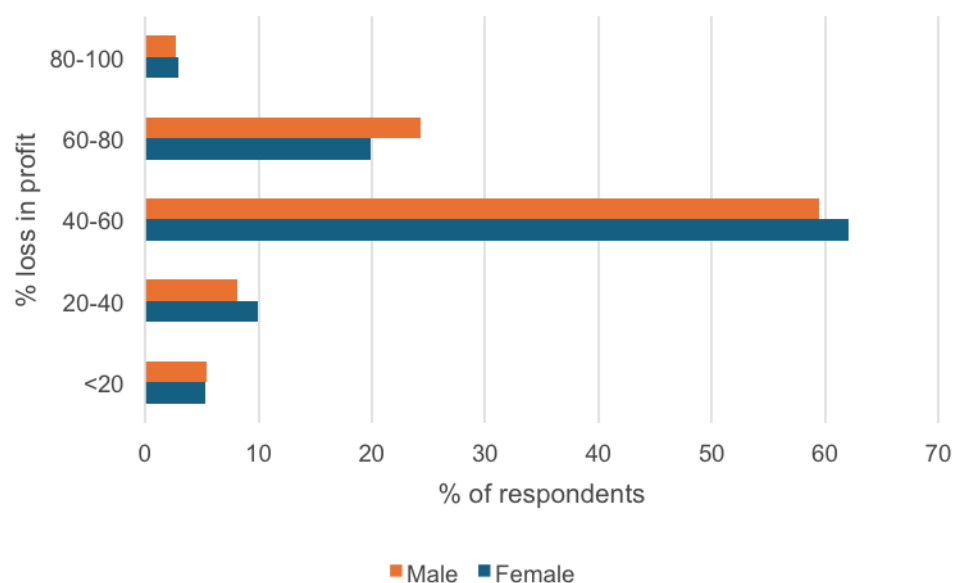
Informal food vendors in northern Namibia employed a variety of strategies to manage the economic and operational challenges brought on by the pandemic, with some gender-based differences evident in the data. The range of

responses reflects the resilience and adaptability of informal food vendors in crisis conditions. The most common coping strategy for both male and female vendors was offering credit to customers, used by 64% of men and 57% of women (Table 12). This indicates a sustained effort to retain customer loyalty during a time when purchasing power was likely reduced. Reducing business hours was another widely used tactic by both women (28%) and men (30%), suggesting that many vendors experienced decreased foot traffic or demand. Temporary closure of the business was more common among women (24%) than men (14%), indicating that more women faced severe disruptions. A significant number of women vendors reduced the amount of food purchased and prepared (28% versus 12% of men). Both used mobile phones for their operations during the pandemic (women: 27%, men: 30%), indicating a shift toward digital adaptation. Other common strategies included changing the kinds of food sold (women: 21%, men: 26%) and negotiating with suppliers (women: 13.5%, men: 16%) to cut costs. Overall, the data reveals that female vendors leaned more heavily on operational cutbacks, while male vendors more often used financial flexibility, like offering credit or adjusting product strategies.

Table 11: Impact of the Pandemic on Net Profits

	Women %	Men %
Reduced net profit by > 20%	76.5	64.0
Net profit stayed the same	14.5	26.0
Reduced net profit by 10%-20%	7.5	10.0
Reduced net profit by < 10%	1.5	0.0
Net profit increased	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0

Figure 5: Lost Profits during the Pandemic



	Women (%)	Men (%)
I offered credit to some of my customers	56.5	64.0
I reduced my business hours	28.0	30.0
I reduced the amount of food purchased and prepared	27.5	12.0
I used a mobile phone for orders, payments, and coordination with suppliers	26.5	30.0
I temporarily closed the business	23.5	14.0
I changed the kinds of food I sell	21.0	26.0
I sell goods more cheaply than my competitors	15.5	16.0
I tried to negotiate prices with my suppliers or find more affordable suppliers	13.5	16.0
I purchase stock in bulk	12.0	8.0
I offered additional discounts	12.0	24.0
I reduced the salary of my employees	6.0	2.0
I offered online services, took online orders and provided delivery services	5.5	4.0
I reduced the number of employees hired in this business	4.0	0.0
I extended my hours of operation	3.7	10.0
I increased the price of my goods	3.5	6.0
I changed the location of my business	2.0	8.0

Access to Pandemic Relief

Figure 6 highlights the exclusion of most informal food vendors from the government's business support mechanisms during the pandemic. Only 8% of women respondents received government assistance, while none of the men accessed support. Thus, the overwhelming majority, 92% of women and 96% of men, did not benefit from government business support. Figure 7 shows the number of food vendor households who received the one-time government COVID-19 cash grants of N\$750. Around one-third of both women and men respondents indicated that they or

a household member had received the grant. Two-thirds of both groups did not receive anything.

Two-thirds of the vendors identified food support as their most significant need during the pandemic. However, government food support reached a relatively small number of informal vendor households, with only 15% of female respondents and 8% of male respondents reporting that they or a household member received food assistance in the form of packets, free rations, or coupons. Most were not aware that assistance was even available. Less than 1% had received food aid from a non-government source.

Figure 6: Food Vendor Access to Government Support for Small Businesses

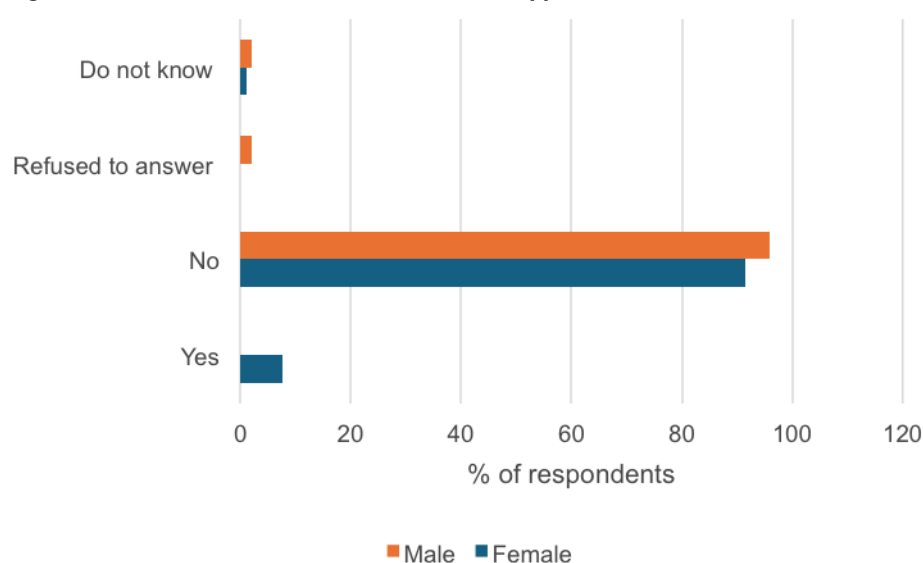
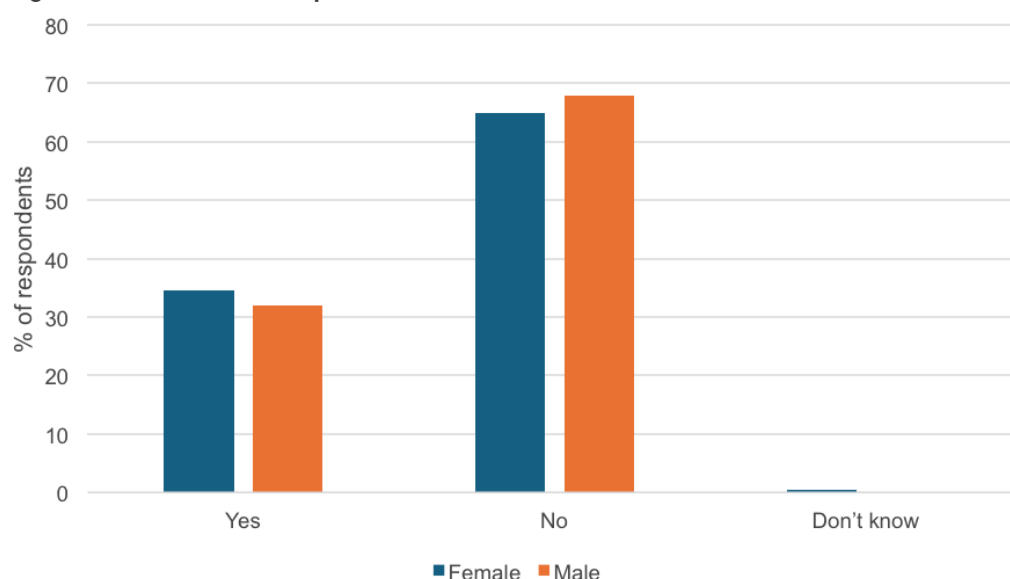


Figure 7: Food Vendor Receipt of COVID-19 Cash Grant



Post-Pandemic Recovery

Most of the informal food vendors reported that their business conditions had improved since the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 80% of both women and men vendors indicated that customer numbers had increased, and that they had better sales figures than before the pandemic (Table 13). Many also saw improvements in the supply of goods (72% of men and 77% of women). However, concerns persist around the cost of food supplies, with 23% of women and 16% of men reporting that conditions are worse now. Transportation costs are largely viewed as stable, though a small minority have seen them increase. The primary post-pandemic shift has been more intense competition (cited by 36% of men and 42% of women), suggesting that more households have turned to informal food vending to survive. Rent costs are reported as mostly unchanged, and many vendors have resumed longer business hours. Overall, the data suggests a strong post-pandemic recovery in demand and operations, tempered by persistent cost pressures and heightened competition.

Although the overall pattern and challenges of post-pandemic recovery are similar for both the women and men food vendors, there are gender differences in the degree of

income growth (Table 14). For example, 60% of men and only 48% of women say that they are earning more now than before the pandemic. Overall, 41% of women and 36% of men are still earning less than they did before the pandemic.

The results of questions on gender roles and empowerment among women informal food vendors revealed a complex interplay between autonomy and household responsibilities. Most of the respondents reported high levels of decision-making autonomy in key personal and financial areas: for example, over 95% said they could decide whether to work for pay outside the home and could independently decide how to use the money they received from the business. Similarly, nearly all could make their own healthcare decisions, family food choices, and social interactions. These findings suggest a strong sense of personal agency among the women surveyed. However, traditional gender roles remain strong and were even extended by the pandemic (Gierse-Arsten, 2024). For example, women vendors are more likely to have to attend to unpaid household responsibilities than men, which can conflict with their income-earning through informal food vending. Almost 90% of the women vendors said that they are the person in their household who spends the most time doing housework, including cleaning, cooking, and caring for children or other members of the household.

Table 13: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Pandemic Business Operating Environment

	Women (%)			Men (%)		
	Better	Same	Worse	Better	Same	Worse
Number of customers	86.5	12.0	1.5	86.0	12.0	0.0
Monthly sales	82.5	12.5	4.0	84.0	12.0	4.0
Supply of goods for my business	76.5	16.0	5.0	72.0	18.0	4.0
Business hours of my business	74.0	23.0	2.5	76.0	20.0	2.0
Cost of food supply for my business	35.0	42.5	22.5	38.0	44.0	16.0
Transportation cost of the business	21.5	72.0	5.0	22.0	74.0	2.0
Competition from other vendors	13.5	44.0	41.5	14.0	48.0	36.0
Rent for my business	3.0	94.0	2.0	8.0	84.0	6.0

Just over a quarter of the women (26%) said that they were now spending more time on buying and preparing food than before COVID-19. And nearly three-quarters (74%) said that the pandemic had increased their general housework load, including cooking (increased for 63%), childcare (28%), caring for sick family members (25%) and care of the elderly (18%) (Figure 8).

Conclusion

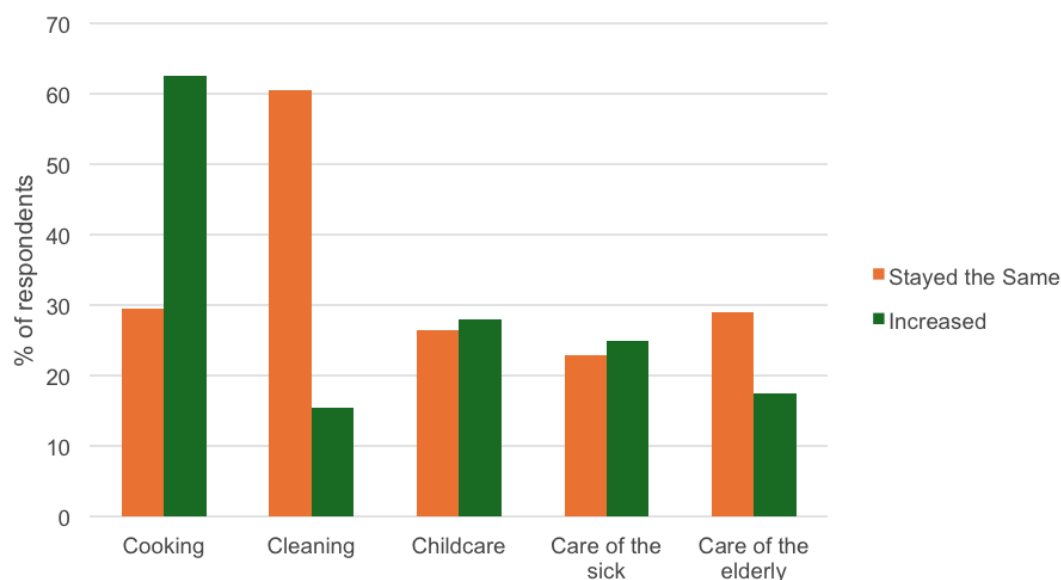
This paper examines the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on the informal food retail sector in the urban corridor of Oshakati, Ongwediva, and Ondangwa in northern Namibia, close to the Angolan border. The objective was to identify practical pathways towards a more resilient, sustainable, and gender-transformative recovery from the pandemic in the country's secondary cities. The results of the post-pandemic survey of informal food vendors in the region's open markets confirm the findings of previous research that informal food vending is both a survival strategy and the cornerstone of urban food security in northern Namibia by sustaining low-income households and generating much-needed income for many residents of the area (Kazembe et al., 2021, 2022; Nickanor et al., 2023a). Women are the major participants in informal food vending on the streets and in the open markets but constantly face extremely challenging conditions and gender disadvantages. The pandemic made these gendered fault lines more pronounced and showed that the crisis was not gender-neutral but widened pre-pandemic vulnerabilities.

The evidence from northern Namibia presented in this paper does show that both women and men food vendors struggled to remain viable during the long months of the pandemic. However, women vendors carried a disproportionate burden during and after the pandemic. They lost more customers, more sales, and more income than men. They were also more likely to close their businesses, to face disruptions in sourcing supplies, and to see the overall value of their enterprises decline. The economic pressures of the pandemic were compounded by a dramatic increase in unpaid domestic labour as schools closed and families spent more time at home. The demands of childcare, cooking, household management, and care for the sick and elderly grew sharply, leaving women with less time and energy for their business operations. The combination of these pressures contributed to a slower and more fragile post-pandemic recovery for women.

Another major finding of the research is the resilience and adaptability of food vendors during the pandemic crisis, including reducing business hours, altering the foods sold, offering credit to loyal customers, and using mobile phones for communication and orders. Although this shows their entrepreneurial ingenuity and ability to innovate under pressure, the strategies were largely reactive and insufficient to fully compensate for the loss of business and lack of formal protection. The pandemic demonstrated that penalizing informal vendors undermines their livelihoods and jeopardizes food access for low-income urban households that rely on them. Building longer-term resilience will require supportive policies and an enabling environment. In this regard, the findings therefore have several policy implications:

	Women (%)	Men (%)
More than before the COVID-19 pandemic	47.5	60.0
Less than before the COVID-19 pandemic	41.0	36.0
Same as before the COVID-19 pandemic	11.5	4.0
Total	100.0	100.0

Figure 8: Changes in Domestic Responsibilities of Women Food Vendors



There were significant gaps in the delivery of government support to informal food vendors in secondary cities in northern Namibia during the pandemic. Most food vendors, both women and men, were excluded from business relief schemes, food assistance, and the one-time emergency relief grant. Lack of information and administrative barriers left informal vendors financially strapped at precisely the moment they needed support the most. This highlights the fundamental disjuncture between the scale and importance of the informal sector's contribution to food security and the urban economy and the limited institutional support it receives. The exclusion of informal workers from emergency relief is therefore symptomatic of a broader policy gap: i.e. despite its contribution to employment and urban food access, it is weakly integrated into national and municipal development frameworks.

Overall, research findings by the Women Feeding Cities project reported in this paper show that the pandemic aftermath provided an important opportunity to reimagine the informal food sector in Namibia. This requires a deliberate shift toward policies that value and protect the work of informal traders, particularly the women whose labour keeps much of the urban population fed and functioning. A gender-transformative recovery can ensure that the sector not only thrives in the short-term but also becomes more equitable, resilient, and sustainable. Municipal governance of the informal food sector needs to shift from punitive enforcement to more inclusive approaches that recognize informal food vendors as key actors in urban food systems.

There have been two recent post-pandemic policy developments that could accelerate a gender-responsive post-pandemic recovery and sustainability if fully implemented at the national and local level:

- In 2023, the Ministry of Industrialisation and Trade (Republic of Namibia, 2023) has released a Draft National Informal Economy, Startups and Entrepreneurship Development Policy (NIESED) Policy with policy recommendations for supporting the sector (Appendix A).
- In 2025, the Bank of Namibia, the Ministry Industry, Mines and Energy, and the Ministry of Justice and Labour with the support of the United Nations in Namibia concluded a three-part diagnostic on the informal sector in Namibia (Bank of Namibia et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c) which develops a recommended Policy Framework and Roadmap (Appendix B). These documents indicate that a managed informal sector is increasingly seen as a positive economic force in the country that needs fostering, formalisation, and financial support.

Section 3.1.9 of the Policy Framework on “Advancing Gender Equality and Empowering Women” is a crucial component that addresses the fact that women constitute the majority of Namibia’s informal workforce and face the most acute vulnerabilities (Appendix B). The section recognizes that the mere transition to formality is insufficient without addressing the structural barriers that create and perpetuate gender inequality in the sector. These barriers include a significant

gender pay gap, high rates of gender-based harassment and exploitation in workplaces like markets, and the substantial burden of unpaid care work, often due to the limited availability of affordable childcare.

To address these issues, the framework mandates targeted support and empowerment programs. Key recommendations include a legislative and enforcement push to develop and strictly apply anti-harassment and violence policies across all informal work environments. The framework also calls for subsidized or funded childcare facilities to be made available closer to women’s places of work, thereby mitigating the impact of the care burden on their economic productivity. On the economic front, interventions require the creation of specialized financial products, business development services, and mentorship tailored to the unique needs of women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, major social protection reform is necessary to ensure the extension of maternity protection to all female workers, regardless of their formal or informal status. Ultimately, the goal is to promote women’s leadership and representation in policy dialogues to ensure the entire formalization roadmap is both equitable and sustainable.

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APPENDIX A

Summary of Draft National Informal Economy, Startups and Entrepreneurship Development Policy (NIESED) (Republic of Namibia, 2023)

This Summary provides a concise overview of the NIESED policy framework, highlighting its vision, objectives, strategic pillars, and proposed measures to support informal traders, startups, and entrepreneurs. It aims to facilitate stakeholder engagement, guide public discussion, and inform policy decision-making.

Introduction

The informal economy forms a critical pillar of livelihoods and economic participation in Namibia. Although it contributes significantly to employment creation, household income, and local economic development, it continues to operate with limited institutional support, inadequate infrastructure, and regulatory constraints. Startups and emerging entrepreneurial ventures also face numerous challenges, including limited access to finance, lack of capacity development opportunities, and an underdeveloped enabling ecosystem. The Draft National Informal Economy, Startups and Entrepreneurship Development Policy (NIESED) seeks to address these challenges by providing a comprehensive framework for transforming the informal economy and fostering a dynamic entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Vision and Mission

Vision

- To develop and mainstream the Namibian informal economy as a key pillar of national development.
- To strengthen Namibia's entrepreneurship ecosystem to advance inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Mission

- To optimise Namibian citizens' participation in economic opportunities arising from the informal economy.
- To build a viable national entrepreneurship development system supporting a diverse and dynamic economy.
- To establish policy guidelines that create an enabling regulatory and institutional environment for informal economy growth, innovation, and entrepreneurial development.

Policy Goal

To provide the strategic and operational frameworks necessary to support inclusive entrepreneurship and transform the informal economy into a more productive, innovative, and sustainable sector contributing meaningfully to Namibia's development.

Overall Objectives

The NIESED policy aims to:

- Strengthen the viability of informal economy actors and integrate them into mainstream economic development.

- Address key constraints affecting informal traders and startups, including infrastructure gaps, limited institutional support, and skills shortages.
- Build a robust entrepreneurship ecosystem that supports innovation, competitiveness, and growth.
- Establish capacity-building programmes that equip entrepreneurs with globally competitive competencies.
- Create systems for monitoring, evaluation, and evidence-based policy implementation.

Specific Objectives

The policy's specific objectives are to:

- Promote formalisation through associations, cooperatives, and regulatory compliance.
- Provide a foundation for local authority by-laws guiding the regulation and development of the informal economy.
- Support new venture creation and growth opportunities for existing traders and entrepreneurs.
- Strengthen coordination across institutions that support entrepreneurship and informal economic activity.
- Improve resource allocation strategies for sector support.
- Expand access to entrepreneurship development programmes.
- Ensure systematic collection, analysis, and dissemination of informal economy statistics.
- Establish a strong Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) framework.

Strategic Pillars and Key Interventions

Pillar 1: Formalisation of Informal Trading Activities

- Develop a harmonised national registration system.
- Centralise data on informal traders for planning and support targeting.
- Promote business registration, association formation, and regulatory compliance.
- Provide business training, financial literacy, and compliance assistance.

Pillar 2: Regional and Local Authority Planning & By-Laws

- Integrate informal trading needs into spatial, transport, and health planning.
- Develop supportive by-laws recognising the economic value of informal trade.
- Assign MIT regional staff as Business Inspectors for compliance verification.
- Standardise definitions and guidelines on illegal trading practices.

Pillar 3: Labour Protection

- Expand worker education on labour rights and employer obligations.
- Establish representative associations to protect informal workers.
- Strengthen mechanisms to address labour exploitation and resolve disputes.

Pillar 4: Operating Space Allocation

- Implement transparent trader space allocation procedures.
- Increase and improve designated trading areas in strategic high-traffic zones.
- Pair allocations with mentorship and enterprise development support.
- Promote competitive and performance-based trader selection.

Pillar 5: Right to Operate and Tariffs

- Introduce trading site valuation frameworks.
- Implement differential tariff systems supportive of new and vulnerable traders.

Pillar 6: Entrepreneurship and Skills Development

- Provide training on business management, financial skills, and sector-specific competencies.
- Introduce competency-based recognition for experienced informal traders.
- Facilitate mentorships, networking, and partnerships with established firms.
- Support incubators and accelerators that assist startups and informal entrepreneurs.

Pillar 7: Financing Informal Traders

- Expand financial literacy programmes.
- Promote inclusive financial products suitable for informal traders.
- Enable financing based on personal banking records where business registration is lacking.

Pillar 8: Data Management and Statistics

- Create local and national databases of informal economy actors.
- Integrate informal economy statistics into national accounts through the Namibia Statistics Agency.

Pillar 9: Social Protection

- Reform the Social Security Act to include informal workers.
- Align the Employees' Compensation Act and Pension Fund Act to informal sector needs.

- Extend health, injury, disability, and retirement protection coverage.

Expected Outcomes

- Increased formalisation and improved regulatory compliance.
- Greater institutional coordination and efficiency of support mechanisms.
- Enhanced entrepreneurial competencies and stronger business growth.
- Expanded financial access for informal traders and startups.
- Improved data for decision-making and sector planning.
- Stronger social protection coverage for informal workers.
- A more vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable informal economy and entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Policy Recommendations

- Strengthen multi-sectoral collaboration involving ministries, local authorities, private sector actors, and development partners.
- Prioritise capacity development initiatives, especially for women and youth entrepreneurs.
- Allocate sustainable funding for infrastructure, training, and regulatory reforms.
- Institutionalise regular data collection on the informal economy.
- Integrate NIESED implementation into national and regional development plans.
- Establish a phased implementation roadmap supported by a robust Monitoring & Evaluation framework.

Conclusion

The NIESED policy presents an opportunity to reposition the informal economy and entrepreneurship sector as engines of inclusive growth and economic resilience in northern Namibia. Effective implementation will require coordinated action, strong political commitment, and sustained support from stakeholders across government, the private sector, and civil society.

Note: This Summary of the NIESED was prepared with the assistance of ChatGPT 4.0.

Appendix B

Summary of Diagnostic of Informality in Namibia: Policy Framework and Roadmap (Republic of Namibia, 2025c)

1. The Issue: Informality as a National Pillar with Decent Work Deficits

The informal economy is a central pillar of Namibia's economic and social fabric. Despite its size, it is characterized by profound vulnerabilities and a historically unsupportive policy environment.

- **Economic Scale:** The sector contributes an estimated 25% to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and accounts for 57.7% of the total workforce.
- **Demographics:** It is the primary source of livelihood for a majority of the population, with women constituting 53% of its participants.
- **Challenges:** The sector faces "decent work deficits," including the absence of formal contracts, job security, social protection, and access to finance. These challenges are compounded by a fragmented, often punitive legal framework and the legacy of apartheid-era spatial planning.

2. The Policy Shift and Core Objectives

The Policy Framework proposes a paradigm shift away from neglect or punitive enforcement toward a developmental, rights-based, and inclusive strategy. The transition to formality is designed to be gradual and evidence based.

The framework is built upon eight core strategic objectives:

1. Reducing decent work deficits.
2. Recognizing and appreciating the informal economy.
3. Developing its commercial viability.
4. Ensuring social inclusion.
5. Facilitating a gradual, evidence-based transition to formality.
6. Enhancing social protection.
7. Strengthening institutional coordination.
8. Leveraging inclusive digital transformation.

3. Key Recommendations: A Two-Pillar Action Plan

The framework's action plan is divided into cross-cutting foundational reforms and targeted sectoral interventions.

Pillar 1: Cross-Cutting Foundational Reforms

These reforms aim to overhaul the systemic environment affecting all informal economy actors.

- **Legal & Regulatory Reform:** Implement comprehensive legal and policy recognition of informality and simplify business registration processes. Critically, reform restrictive local by-laws that stem from apartheid-era spatial planning.

- **Social Protection & Finance:** Design flexible social protection schemes suitable for irregular incomes and develop inclusive financial products. Incentives should be provided for enterprises to register employees with the Social Security Commission (SSC) and businesses with BIPA and NamRA.
- **Digital & Data Infrastructure:** Invest in skills development, digital public infrastructure (DPI), and robust data collection systems to guide evidence-based policy. This includes ensuring foundational platforms like NamPay and the biometric e-ID system are deployed equitably.

Pillar 2: Targeted Sectoral Interventions

Specific interventions are recommended for two key sectors with high levels of informal employment:

- Agriculture, Fishing, and Forestry (AFF).
- Food and Accommodation Services.

Interventions focus on strengthening value chains, improving market access, and creating enabling business environments within these sectors.

4. Gender Responsiveness and Women's Empowerment

The Policy Framework makes gender responsiveness a core guiding principle and addresses the specific challenges faced by women, who constitute the majority (53%) of the informal workforce.

- **Workforce Dominance:** Women are overrepresented in the informal economy, particularly making up approximately 77% of the workforce in the food and accommodation services sector.
- **Vulnerabilities:** Women face compounding issues, including a gender pay gap, high rates of gender-based exploitation and harassment, and the overwhelming burden of care responsibilities, which is exacerbated by limited access to affordable childcare.
- **Lack of Protection:** A significant number of women workers (an estimated 43%) lack access to essential protections like maternity benefits.
- **Targeted Intervention:** The framework aligns with the National Informal Economy, Startups, and Entrepreneurship Development Policy (NIESED), which explicitly targets women and vulnerable entrepreneurs. It includes a dedicated action area on "Advancing Gender Equality and Empowering Women" to address these structural inequalities.

The recommendations are part of the intervention titled "Targeted Support and Empowerment Programmes for Women in the Informal Economy."

The framework outlines the following key actions:

- **Policies Against Violence and Harassment:** Developing and strictly enforcing policies against gender-based violence and harassment in all workplaces, including informal markets and private homes.

- **Childcare Facilities:** Availing funded or subsidized childcare facilities closer to women's places of work.
- **Targeted Business Support:** Creating targeted financial products, business development services (BDS), and mentorship programmes specifically for women entrepreneurs.
- **Maternity Protection:** Ensuring women's access to social protection, with a particular focus on reforming and extending maternity benefits to all female workers regardless of their employment status.
- **Leadership and Representation:** Promoting women's leadership and representation in informal economy organizations and policy dialogues.
- **Supportive Infrastructure:** Investing in supportive infrastructure such as safe, well-lit marketplaces and accessible childcare facilities to reduce the burden of unpaid care work.

5. Implementation and Governance

Success hinges on overcoming poor coordination and the implementation deficit observed in past policies.

- **Long-Term Institutional Framework:** The framework proposes a new, central coordinating body: the Informal Economy Agency (IEA).
- **Strategic Placement:** The IEA is strategically recommended to be placed within the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) to ensure it has the necessary political authority to drive a coherent, whole-of-government approach and overcome inter-ministerial silos.
- **Short-Term Measure:** For the period 2026-2027, the framework recommends establishing a dedicated Division of Informal Economy within the Ministry of Industries, Mines and Energy as an immediate step.
- **Timeline:** The implementation is guided by a phased roadmap spanning from 2026 to 2035, emphasizing that addressing informality is a complex, long-term commitment.

Note: This Summary was prepared with the assistance of Gemini 3.0.