

Women Vendors and Cross-Border Livelihoods: An Empirical Study of the Balat–Dalora Border Haat on the India–Bangladesh Frontier

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Abstract

This study examines women vendors' livelihood strategies at the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat between India and Bangladesh, using surveys, interviews, and observations. It focuses on the range of products sold, challenges faced, and socio-cultural factors influencing women's entrepreneurship. Balat-Dalora notably supports the highest number of women vendors among Border-Haats, offering critical livelihood opportunities in areas with limited employment options.

Keywords: Border-Haat, Women vendor, Livelihood, Cross-Border-Trade, Labor force

Introduction

India and Bangladesh maintained strong ties; following Bangladesh's independence, however, border fencing disrupted communities, particularly separating Meghalaya's tribes from Bangladeshi Bengalis and severely impacting women's livelihoods by restricting access to markets and commercial centers. Despite limited government investment in infrastructure, the 2010 formalization of Cross-Border Trade (CBT) through Border-Haats aimed to address such marginalization. Currently, five Border-Haats operate, facilitating weekly trade within 5 km of the border. Among these, Balat-Dalora records the highest women vendor participation, while other haats show declining involvement. Although women's earnings are modest, these markets provide vital income opportunities amid scarce alternatives. Challenges such as inadequate transportation, patriarchal norms, and reproductive roles limit women's mobility and economic participation, particularly on the Bangladesh side. Nevertheless, policy reforms, legal provisions, and improved credit access in both countries have gradually enhanced women's labor force involvement (Wangdi, 2021).

The establishment of Border-Haats addresses historical hardships stemming from partition-era border closures, which halted traditional trade and disproportionately affected women, who lacked alternative employment and faced difficulties selling agricultural produce due to infrastructural deficits (Barman, 2018). Recognizing the critical role of Border-Haats in promoting livelihoods and regional cooperation, India and Bangladesh signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2010 to sustain these markets as confidence-building mechanisms enhancing cross-border community ties (Government of India Report, 2010).

Literature Review

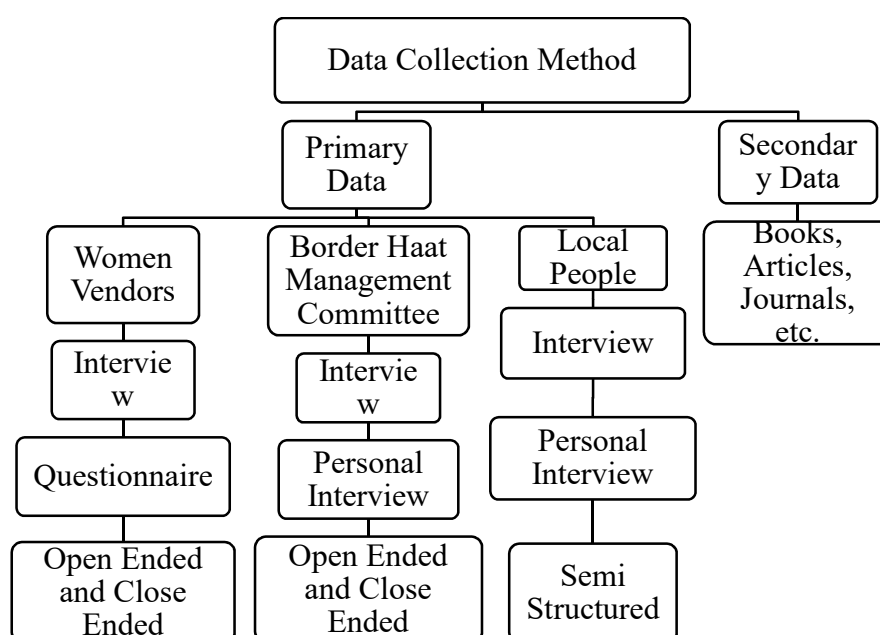
Numerous studies highlight the role of cross-border trade (CBT) in empowering women, particularly in regions with porous borders. Njikam and Tchouassi (2011) emphasize education as a tool for poverty alleviation despite gender challenges, while Ndala and Jnr. (2019) note women traders' economic contributions in Malawi amid high costs. Livani and Solotaroff (2019) and Alam et al. (2019) address barriers such as sociocultural norms, limited market access, and gender gaps in vendor participation in South Asia and Africa, calling for gender-sensitive policies and improved infrastructure. In the India-Bangladesh context, Taneja et al. (2018) and Nasreen (2020, 2021) reveal that Border-Haats provide vital platforms for women's economic and social development, although male dominance and harassment concerns persist. Maring (2018) and Rosangpuii (2019) explore women's livelihoods in border towns of Manipur and Mizoram, respectively, highlighting socio-economic challenges but lacking comparative gender analyses. Chakraborty (2018) discusses migration of Bangladeshi women to India driven by limited opportunities, while Singh (2020) advocates government initiatives for women's trade empowerment, despite overlooking stakeholder engagement. Further, Dhar and Mitra (2017) and Sheneyeh (2021) focus on informal trade's role in regional cooperation and women's empowerment in Northeast India and Cameroon-Nigeria borders. However, these studies often underrepresent broader challenges and lack comprehensive methodological details. Collectively, this body of work underscores the critical yet complex role of CBT in women's empowerment, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies, infrastructure development, and further gender-sensitive research.

Research Methodology

The paper attempts to investigate the livelihood status of women vendors in Balat-Dalora Border-Haat, located in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya and Sunamganj district of Bangladesh. The collection of primary data was spread over two weeks in October 2022 and June 2023 focusing on qualitative aspects. Data was collected from the village using the method of participant observation and interview with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire and interview guide. The Interview Guide was chosen as a method of data collection because, it was assumed that in a face-to-face interview, the interpretation of the questions is easily understandable to the respondents. With the aid of the interview guide, the identification of the cognitive body language, feelings, and emotions of the respondents was easily understood. In the process, it would help us establish genuine views and responses from the respondents.

Flow Chart 1 Research Methodology

Source: Made by the researcher based on data collection design



Research Objectives

1. To know the livelihood condition of women in the Balat Border Haat area.
2. To examine the socio-economic problems women faced in the Balat-Dalora Border Haat.

Research Questions

1. What is the livelihood condition of women in adjacent villages after establishing Border Haat?
2. what are the problems faced by women in Balat-Dalora Border Haat?

About Border-Haat

Haat is a colloquial and local term used to mean the Bazaar or market, mostly to recognize weekly or half-weekly markets at hamlets. Border-Haats are small local markets established along the international boundary, the zero point of two countries for developing the border region in particular and holding strong political, economic, and socio-cultural ties between the two countries for general purposes. In the new era of globalization, Border-Haats are formalized for the development of the local people and their welfare (Marwein, 2016). The international borders are now becoming meeting points where two neighbors can meet up and interact and exchange. It has been evident from the literature that in different corners of the world there are lots of border markets which has facilitated remote people to access their daily needs. Such as Khargos-Bazar between the China-Kazakhstan Border, Pasar-Serkin Bazar between Indonesia and Malaysia, and Goma-Gisenyi Bazar between Congo and Rwanda. Even though the security point at the border is important, such meeting grounds can facilitate people-to-people connections and economic as well as cultural exchange which can contribute to improved relations at the grassroots between people of the contiguous border (Bhuiyan & Salam, 2019).

Keeping the importance of Border-Haat for the ease of life and welfare of people at the Indo-Bangladesh border as an objective, the Governments of India and Bangladesh decided to maintain the same at the respective borders. A decisive step was taken by the governments of India and Bangladesh to revive Border-Haats after many decades, marked by the signing of a MoU in New Delhi on 23 October 2010. Following this agreement, till now five Border-Haats have been established. The first Border-Haat was officially opened in Kalaichar, Meghalaya in 2011. Simultaneously, a second Border-Haat was opened in Balat, Meghalaya in May 2012. Accordingly, two in Tripura namely Srinagar- Chagnaiya Border-Haat and Kamala Sagar- Tarapur Border-Haat were established in 2015. On 6th April 2023, in the West Khasi Hill district and Sylhet Division between India and Bangladesh, one more Border-Haat was inaugurated which is Bholaganj Border-Haat (Govt. of India, 2023).

The MoU suggests that purchase per person is limited to the equivalent of 200 dollars in each Border-Haat. It also states that the size of all Border-Haats has to be 75x75 meters on the zero line. The commodities eligible for trade in the Border Haats are outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, and Bangladesh. The number of vendors and vendees can vary from one Border-Haat to another. Native people staying within a 5 km radius of the international border can come and deal with the Border-Haats (Govt. of India Report, 2010).

Balat-Dalora Border-Haat

This Border-Haat is 98 kilometers away from Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya. It's close to pillar number 1213 on the zero line. Balat is a village on the Meghalaya border in India, while Dalora is in the Sunamganj district of Bangladesh. Balat village code is 277295, and it's about 35 kilometers from the Ranikor subdivision. The population of Balat is nearly 987, with 501 males and 486 females (Census India Data, 2011). Dalora, situated in Lauwaghar under Sunamganj district in Bangladesh, is where one of the entry points for the Border-Haat is located. The haat, or market, has two entry points: one from Balat, India, and the other from Dalora, Bangladesh. The management of the Border-Haat falls under the responsibility of the Border Haat Management Committee (BHMC), comprising security and customs officials, as well as members of the local community. Each country is allowed to have up to 50 vendors in the haat, selected annually by the committee, within a 5-kilometer radius of the international border. Access to the Border-Haat is restricted to entry points from respective countries. Vendors are permitted to sell their products using their local currency. The Balat-Dalora Border-Haat has been in operation since May 1, 2012.

Picture 1: In the Balat-Dalora Border Haat

Source: *Field study October 2023*



In the context of India-Bangladesh Border-Haats, the term ‘vendor’ refers to individuals selling approved goods. As per the MoU between the two governments, each Haat can host up to 100 vendors—50 from each country—with flexibility for expansion by the joint BHMC. Initially, participation was limited, prompting the inclusion of Bengali businessmen and tribal communities, mainly men, to sustain operations. Over time, awareness of the benefits led to increased interest. Border-Haats now offers vital income for vendors and employment for local laborers and transporters. All vendors receive photo ID cards for official participation. At the Balat-Dalora Border Haat, vendors trade commodities listed in the MoU, which was revised in 2017 based on field data (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2017). The commodities, identified through data collected during field visits, are listed in the chart below.

Figure 1: Percentage of all vendors selling products

Source: Data collected from the field by the researcher on October 2022 & June 2023



The data extracted from the chart provides insights into the distribution of authorized vendors and the range of products they sell at the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat. Notably, it indicates that 20% of authorized vendors specialize in selling locally produced items, emphasizing the importance of indigenous products in the market. Additionally, 16% of vendors focus on offering Minor Forest Products, capitalizing on the abundant natural resources of the region. Another 8% of vendors concentrate on selling Products of Cottage Industries, showcasing traditional craftsmanship and artisanal skills. Furthermore, 16% of vendors deal in Native produce products, reflecting the diversity of locally sourced agricultural produce available at the Border Haat. Moreover, 12% of vendors cater to the demand for small household and agricultural implements, addressing the requirements of local consumers. Similarly, another 12% of vendors offer plastic, aluminum, cookery, and stationery products, catering to a broad spectrum of consumer preferences. Overall, this data

underscores the diverse array of offerings at the Border Haat and the pivotal role played by authorized vendors in facilitating CBT and economic activity.

Women in Balat-Dalora Border-Haat

The inauguration of the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat has significantly revitalized women's livelihoods, particularly those previously marginalized by post-independence border restrictions and inadequate infrastructure. Women engaged in small-scale trades such as textile-making, bamboo weaving, and organic farming have regained market access through this initiative. The collaborative efforts of India and Bangladesh in formalizing cross-border trade have yielded substantial socio-economic benefits, including improved people-to-people ties, familial reconnections, and regional stability. Field studies at Balat-Dalora reveal active participation of tribal and Bengali women in local trade dynamics. Their advocacy led the BHMC to increase the allocation of vendee cards for women and to introduce a vendor quota for residents within 5 km of the border. A notable trend among Indian women vendors is the bulk purchase of essential goods at the weekly haat, which they resell in nearby local markets. This practice enhances their income while reducing reliance on distant urban centers, thereby strengthening their economic independence. The accompanying chart reflects vendor participation patterns at the Border-Haat. As of 2022, women's participation in India-Bangladesh Border-Haats was limited, with Balat having the highest number of women vendors (8) and others far fewer or none (Taneja et al., 2018). This reflects localized efforts to promote gender inclusion. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of all Border-Haats until mid-2022. By January 2024, the Tripura-Bangladesh Border-Haats—Kamalasagar and Srinagar—remain closed, though government plans are underway to reopen them and restore cross-border trade activities. Moreover, the field visit of 2022 & 2023 give immense changes in the Border Haat towards Women participation.

The empirical data underscores a notable gender disparity among vendors at the Balat-Dalora Border Haat. Among the sampled pool of 50 Indian vendors, only 12 were women, while a mere 5 women vendors were observed among the 50 Bangladeshi vendors. This striking incongruity underscores pervasive structural impediments that deter women from active participation in the Border Haat milieu, a subject that will be explored in subsequent sections. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that despite these disparities, women exhibit a significant presence at the Balat-Dalora Border Haat not only as vendors but also as vendees, a trend consistent with observations made at other Border Haats.

Social status varies for women across different locations in both countries. For instance, in the Balat-Dalora border area, women from Meghalaya, India, participate significantly as vendors, vendees, laborers, and transporters. But a trend that is notably absent among Bangladeshi women in the same location, especially as laborers and transporters. This stark difference is largely attributed to the contrasting cultural ethos in this region. Meghalaya's matrilineal society contrasts sharply with Bangladesh's strict patriarchy, where women, particularly in certain areas, face cultural norms mandating purdah (veiling) and restricting their participation in Border Haat. Notably, the woman vendors found in the Balat-Dalora border area belong to mainly tribal or indigenous communities (Garo/Mandi/Khasi), which also follow matrilineal practices. However, Bengali women from the Indian side are also observed in the Border Haat.

Additionally, the participation of women vendors in Balat-Dalora Border-Haat is influenced by the availability of basic infrastructural facilities. The absence of separate washrooms for men and women, coupled with unsanitary conditions and inadequate water supply, poses significant challenges. Moreover, open selling spaces may be perceived as unsafe, raising concerns about the potential loss of belongings. These conditions often lead women to seek approval from their families before participating in Border Haat for the whole day, further constraining their involvement which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

The Livelihood of Women Vendors at Balat-Dalora Border-Haat

The Balat-Dalora Border-Haat acts as a crucial trading post between India and Bangladesh, specifically benefiting the local communities residing in Meghalaya, India, and Sunamganj, Bangladesh. This trading initiative holds significant importance for the livelihoods of these communities, particularly for tribal women. Traditionally engaged in agricultural activities or local vending, these women find the Border-Haat an enticing avenue to sell their goods, as there is a higher demand for their products on the Bangladeshi side. By participating in this CBT, these women can expand their consumer base and increase their income.

Located on the outskirts of the Indo-Bangladesh border, the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat plays a pivotal role in supporting the livelihoods of people residing in the Dangar-Balat region of Meghalaya. Field studies suggest that initiatives such as separate quotas or preferential treatment have been implemented to encourage the involvement of women

vendors in this market. Women take on various roles within the Border-Haat, including selling goods, purchasing items, providing labor, transporting goods, and assisting in various tasks. This multifaceted participation allows women to supplement their household income, thereby contributing to economic sustainability within their communities. Overall, the Border-Haat serves as an essential platform for economic empowerment, particularly for women, in these border regions.

The Border-Haat, while offering promising prospects for economic advancement and engendering livelihood, presents notable challenges. Multifaceted obstacles impede women's involvement in this trading mechanism. Vendor cards are more easily obtained by individuals who can navigate the appropriate channels, exert influence over issuing authorities, and hold a business operation consistent for the whole year. In this context, women vendors may become vulnerable due to their potentially limited access to the channels required for obtaining vendor cards, and challenges in maintaining year-round business operations. Predominantly, entrenched patriarchal structures within Bangladeshi society restrict women's engagement due to prevailing gender norms and expectations. These constraints are further compounded by safety apprehensions, particularly evident during journeys to the remote Border Haats, particularly for tribal women of Meghalaya. Thus, dissuading women from participating in trade activities.

Moreover, gender disparities persist due to unequal access to vital resources such as capital, and information, consequently hampering women's competitiveness in the market due to their ignorance, as most of these women are illiterate. The dearth of women's representation in management committees and decision-making bodies further hampers the development of inclusive policies catered to the needs of women traders. Additionally, the burden of unpaid care work diminishes women's capacity for economic pursuits. Furthermore, entrenched social stigma and discrimination, rooted in cultural perceptions, pose additional hurdles to women's mobility and participation within the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat settings. Tackling these intertwined challenges is pivotal for fostering gender parity and empowering women in Border Haat. Effective interventions are required, including training programs and resource allocation, enhanced safety measures, and the promotion of women's representation in decision-making spheres. Such endeavors are indispensable for realizing gender equality and enabling the full participation of women in Border Haat initiatives.

It has become evident that despite an increase in women's participation rates as vendors, buyers, and laborers, numerous structural inadequacies persist in and around the Border-Haat, which are far from women-friendly. Among these issues, a significant shortfall lies in infrastructural adequacy, particularly concerning physical connectivity. During field visits, it was observed that the village of Balat is situated near a river, and the bridge connecting it has been frequently damaged by floods during the monsoon season. Regrettably, the bridge remains unrepaired from 2022, exacerbating the situation. Consequently, the primary road linking this Border-Haat from the Indian side is severely compromised. Vendors and buyers are compelled to transport their goods on foot, as vehicular access beyond the first gate to the second gate is restricted. Moreover, the region experiences frequent rainfall, with over half of the months characterized by such weather conditions, rendering the road impassable for vehicles. These challenges significantly impede women's participation and mobility within the Border-Haat, necessitating urgent attention and intervention to address these infrastructural deficiencies and promote gender-inclusive access to trading opportunities.

Picture 2: An Indian side Women Vendor transports goods to Border Haat.

Source: Field study October 2023



The officials overseeing the Border-Haat of Balat-Dalora have raised concerns regarding the lack of adequate infrastructure for women, particularly in terms of restroom facilities and shading. From the Bangladesh side, the level of participation among women vendors remains notably low due to socio-cultural barriers. Similarly, both Border-Haats in

Tripura suffer from a lack of female vendor representation, largely attributed to inadequate infrastructure, such as the absence of designated vending spaces and restroom facilities for women within the haat premises. Moreover, the BHMC prohibits the use of mobile phones inside the market, further deterring women from participating.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted women vendors at the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat, worsening their already vulnerable position in the labor force. Fieldwork conducted in October 2022 and June 2023 revealed that many women lost their livelihoods, lacked resources to migrate, and faced security threats and diminished independence. The nationwide lockdown in India disrupted women's access to vendor roles, and even after the Haat reopened, many couldn't regain their positions (Allard et al., 2022). The suspension of the Border-Haat led to widespread economic hardship not only for women vendors but also for buyers, laborers, and transporters. In response to poverty and unemployment exacerbated by the pandemic, some individuals turned to illicit trade, risking their lives. High transport costs further made legal agricultural trade economically unfeasible in these remote regions (Alam et al., 2019).

Women vendors at the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat play a vital role in sustaining livelihoods in remote border areas. Their participation fosters economic empowerment, financial independence, and improved socio-economic status. Many sell locally sourced goods and handicrafts, helping preserve traditional crafts while promoting trade and tourism. Their involvement also promotes gender inclusivity, challenging traditional norms and enabling broader community benefits. Earnings are often reinvested into local businesses or community initiatives, creating a positive ripple effect. The following pie chart illustrates the percentage of women vendors and the variety of items they sell at the Haat.

Figure 2: Number of Women Vendors selling different products

Source: Data collected from the field by the researcher on October 2022 & June 2023

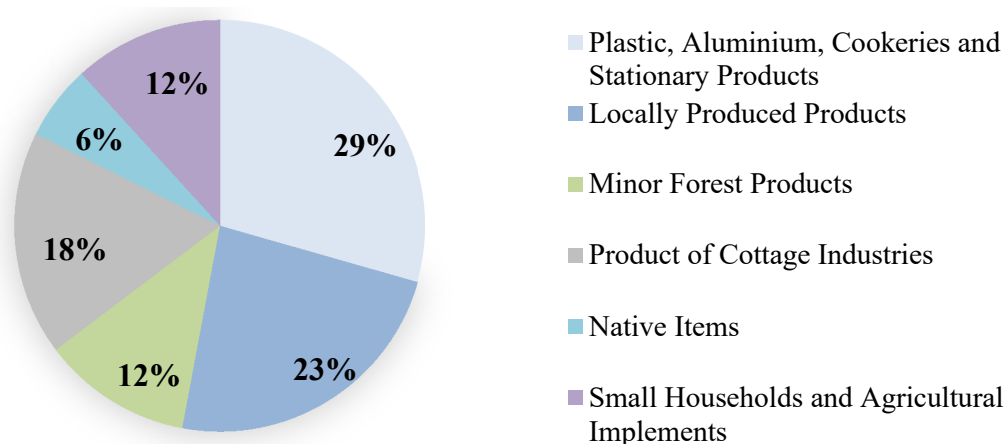


Figure 4, data illustrates the diverse array of products sold by women vendors at the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat. Approximately 23% of women specialize in locally produced items such as pickles, honey, spices, herbal products, and natural skincare infused with local herbs. Another 18% focus on handwoven textiles, showcasing the cultural heritage of Meghalaya. Additionally, 12% offer minor forest produce items, taking advantage of the region's natural resources. About 6% sell native produce products like edible mushrooms and wild berries. Furthermore, 12% sell small household tools, while 29% offer stationary, cosmetics, and cookery items sourced from Bangladeshi vendors. It's noteworthy that some women pursue alternative employment due to the weekly operation of the market. Overall, these observations underscore the vibrant economic activity and cultural exchange facilitated by the Border-Haat. Data gathered through fieldwork and interviews with women vendors at the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat reveals that a majority remain economically active even on non-haat days. Among those surveyed, 24% engage in agriculture and local surplus sales, 29% work in shops or agencies (e.g., tailoring, weaving), and 18% are privately employed. The remaining 29% rely exclusively on Border-Haat activities for income. The trading framework of the Balat-Dalora Haat has notably enhanced women's monthly earnings. While vendor wages are not regulated by the India-Bangladesh MoU, they are determined locally, based on product availability and demand. Women vendors at the Balat Haat earn an average of INR 1500 per day—significantly higher than at other Border-Haats—making it a crucial income source. A single haat day often yields earnings equivalent to a full week of work elsewhere. Laborers on the Indian side generally benefit more due to higher trade volumes. Women with additional employment tend to reinvest haat profits into their businesses for long-term growth. Current findings show that monthly incomes for women vendors are satisfactory and broadly comparable across genders. The accompanying chart illustrates the estimated monthly earnings of women vendors in the present economic context.

Figure 3 Monthly Income of Women Vendors in Balat-Dalora

Source: Data collected from the field by the researcher on October 2022 & June 2023

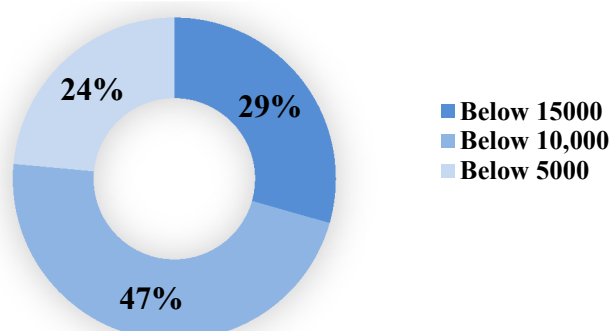


Figure 6 presents the monthly income distribution of women vendors at the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat, based on field data collected in October 2022 and June 2023. The findings show that 24% of surveyed women earn up to ₹5,000 per month, while 47% report monthly incomes between ₹5,000 and ₹10,000, indicating modest financial stability. Additionally, 29% earn between ₹10,000 and ₹15,000, reflecting a relatively higher level of income. These earnings contribute not only to household sustenance but also support broader local economic activity, alongside the roles of vendees, laborers, and transporters in sustaining cross-border trade ecosystems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this empirical study sheds light on the livelihoods of women vendors engaged in CBT within the Balat-Dalora Border-Haat between India and Bangladesh. It underscores the dual nature of their experiences, wherein they navigate both opportunities and challenges. Despite contending with challenges such as gendered norms, the women exhibit resilience in leveraging trade activities to sustain themselves and support their families. The findings underscore the importance of nuanced policy approaches that balance gender-inclusive imperatives with the facilitation of economic opportunities. Furthermore, the study highlights the potential for community collaboration and people-to-people cooperation to foster sustainable trade practices and enhance the inclusivity of Border-Haat initiatives. Moving forward, there is a need for continued research to track the long-term impacts of CBT on women vendors' livelihoods and advocate for gender-responsive policies and support mechanisms to further empower women in trade contexts.

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