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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Informal Women's Work in Public Spaces: Why Should It Matter?

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## ABSTRACT

Informal women's work in public spaces is central to livelihoods and social dynamics in cities of the Global South. For decades, public spaces have functioned as vital sites of economic activity, particularly for women engaged in informal work. Yet, recent urban redevelopment initiatives lead to the displacement and marginalization of these workers. This article investigates the complex, everyday ways in which women's work sustains social reproduction amid enduring colonial legacies, patriarchal norms, and precarious economic conditions. Using a qualitative comparative case study approach grounded in decolonial social reproduction theory, this study examines the intersections of women's lived experiences of productive and reproductive work. It highlights the structural challenges faced by women working in public spaces, including exclusion from statutory planning processes and precarity under capitalist urban transformations. Findings show that informal work not only sustains women's financial autonomy and ability to support their families but also constitutes a source of social identity and economic empowerment. This article argues that gender and development discourses must integrate informality as co-constitutive of urbanism to comprehensively address the needs and contributions of women in the Global South. It asserts that recognizing the advantages women gain from informal work can guide policy efforts toward supporting sustainable livelihoods and promoting inclusive economic growth.

## 1 | Introduction—Why Do Women Work in the Public Space?

Women in Global South cities frequently use public spaces in cities as workspaces for diverse informal work, including forms of trading and food vending (Parizeau 2023; Guha et al. 2022; Bonnet et al. 2019; M. A. Chen 2023). However, recent urban redevelopment policies on public spaces in the Global South often result in the eviction and displacement of these workers (Akuoko et al. 2022; Peck et al. 2009; Watson 2009). As women constitute the most informal workers in these cities, discussions about informal work in public spaces are inherently discussions about women's work. The concept of “women's work” often assumes a universalized Western perspective, overlooking the

labor contributions of women in the Global South, whose work is frequently excluded from global labor statistics (Dibavar 2022; Mezzadri 2019; Vanek et al. 2014). Women's informal work in public spaces is increasingly threatened as state and local governments pursue public–private partnerships under the guise of public policy and development objectives, leading to the intensive transformation of these spaces.

This paper explores the complex, everyday ways in which women's work sustains social reproduction in the face of perpetuated colonial planning legacies, patriarchal norms, and precarious economic conditions. This article is an exploration of the lived experiences of productive and reproductive work of women in public space. It explores the centrality of women's

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informal work to the very functioning of cities in the Global South. We employ the decolonial social reproduction framework as a conceptual lens to assert that women's productive and reproductive labor sustain societies in multifaceted ways (Dibavar 2022; Federici 2011; Ferguson 2019). A decolonial social reproduction lens helps us explore whether women are driven into specific work because of their gender or due to enduring systems of inequality established through colonial reasoning. By examining public spaces through this perspective, this article asks the question, *how is women's work in public spaces organized to sustain social reproduction in Global South cities?*

To this end, this article discusses informality as a relational process of accessing and organizing work through social interactions. This process is shaped by communal land practices, family networks, and a persistent distrust of government rooted in colonial exploitation. These factors influence both women's work choices and their vulnerability to displacement. Public spaces are conceptualized as shared spaces serving diverse purposes (UN Charter on Public Spaces 2013). In Ghana, such spaces extend beyond parks and squares to function as vital hubs of economic and social life, often characterized by contestation stemming from customary ownership and state land expropriation. The recent redevelopment of public spaces in Ghana is a manifestation of the precarious and contested context in which women work amid colonial planning regulations, patriarchal family structures, and ethnic-kinship relations. Our analysis examines how these dynamics impact the gendered division of labor, women's agency, and the perpetuation of work norms. We reframe informal work as a critical lens for understanding gender, labor, and societal structures in the Global South.

Through empirical data from qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and field visits, this article uses the cases of Agbogbloshie in Accra and Central Kumasi that have been proposed for large-scale redevelopment. These two major public spaces are used by women from different backgrounds who engage in various forms of informal work. Further, Agbogbloshie and Central Kumasi are state-recognized public spaces on customary lands of indigenous communities but differ in the ethnic majorities occupying the spaces, the ownership and access rights to the spaces, and employment relations among workers. We present this article in five sections. The next section explores informality, gendered work, and urban redevelopment in Global South cities. Then, a theoretical section explains decolonial social reproduction and how we apply it to answer the research question. The subsequent section discusses the study's approach, methodology, and findings. The discussion of the findings follows with a conclusion.

## 2 | Informality, Gendered Work, and Urban Redevelopment in Global South Cities

Informality is a defining feature of the economies in Global South cities (Al Sayyad 2004; Watson 2009), deeply embedded in their historical, social, political, and economic contexts (De Soto 2000). It manifests in varying degrees, with diverse implications for urban planning and policy (Watson 2009; Roy 2005). Although informality was once perceived as a temporary or transitional phase for marginalized workers (De Soto 1989, 2000; La Porta and

Shleifer 2014), it is now understood as a dominant form of labor that continues to shape urban economies (M. A. Chen 2023; Mezzadri 2019). Rather than being framed as a "problem" to be solved, informality is increasingly seen as an alternative mode of organizing work, challenging traditional notions of formality (Akuoko et al. 2025; Roy 2005; Yusuff 2011).

The gendered dimension of informality is particularly significant, as women are disproportionately represented in informal work across the Global South (Bonnet et al. 2019; UN Women 2005; Vanek et al. 2014). Informal work, for many women, presents both opportunities and significant challenges. It can provide flexible income sources, but often at the expense of precarious conditions, lack of rights, and exploitation (Parizeau 2023; Mezzadri 2019; Ruiz-Castro et al. 2024). The persistence of gender-based stereotypes, which are often instilled within the household, further compounds the challenges women working informally face. These stereotypes place additional burdens on women, particularly in caregiving roles, where work is typically unpaid (Guha et al. 2022; Amporfu et al. 2018).

Informal employment is prevalent in Ghana, with women at the forefront, leading 91% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) 2015). These SMEs account for 89% of national employment and contribute 70% of the country's GDP (Baah-Boateng and Vanek 2020; Good Governance Africa 2023). Despite their substantial economic contributions, women face systemic marginalization in national economic and planning policies. The significance of informal work, particularly for women, remains under-recognized (Mezzadri 2019). This omission is evident in the widespread, redevelopment-induced evictions, relocations, and displacements occurring across cities in the Global South (Watson 2014). These processes reinforce gender inequality and constrain the full potential of urban economies (M. A. Chen 2023).

Hence, it is necessary to examine the implications of urban redevelopment policies on women's work in Ghana, particularly in the context of ongoing public space transformations. Women's work, both paid and unpaid, is fundamental to the functioning of urban economies and broader societal structures (Guha et al. 2022; Parizeau 2023). As such, the public spaces in Ghana are key sites for women's economic activities (Darkwah 2021). However, redevelopment initiatives too often overlook these spaces as workplaces for women, exacerbating their marginalization (Asante and Helbrecht 2019). Women's work in public spaces, which often includes informal economic activities, exists alongside unpaid domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities (Guha et al. 2022; Mezzadri 2019). The dual burden of paid informal work and unpaid caregiving roles limits women's time, resources, and opportunities, reinforcing systemic inequalities and perpetuating gender-based economic exclusion (Fraser 2017; Mezzadri 2021).

### 2.1 | Public Space Redevelopment and Its Implication for Women's Work in Ghana

A complex mix of customary and colonial state systems shapes land governance in Ghana (Boamah and Amoako 2020). Precolonial land was owned and accessed based on membership in

clans (Berry 2018). Ghana's historical land governance shifted from customary authority to state control, beginning with post-independence land acquisitions. Although the 1992 Constitution restored some judicial and executive powers to customary leaders, colonially inherited state policies dominate spatial planning (Akuoko et al. 2025; Boamah and Amoako 2020). Hence, although informal workers continue to cling to precolonial access rights in public spaces, state planning regulations stem from Western ideals to generate tension in governance and the use of public spaces that perpetuate colonial legacies of exclusion and inequality.

Further, the division between public and private spheres, rooted in colonial constructs, continues to shape contemporary understandings of space and work in many cities of the Global South (Segato and Monque 2021), including Ghana. In these urban spaces, women are more likely than men to engage in informal work, particularly within public spaces such as markets and transport stations (Guha et al. 2022). These workers often resist local governments, developers, and investors who push a global city agenda focused on modernization, infrastructure, and urban development (Akuoko et al. 2022; Peck et al. 2009). As the redevelopment of urban spaces progresses, the lack of recognition for women's informal work highlights the gendered nature of urban planning, which historically fails to account for women's roles through the informal economy. Public spaces in sub-Saharan Africa have long served as vital workspaces for women (M. A. Chen 2012; UN Charter on Public Spaces 2013), although these spaces are often shaped by urban planning and transport sectors that reflect male perspectives and priorities. Urban planning tends to focus on the needs of male breadwinners and formal sectors (King and Theodorides-Feldman 2022). Hence, these spaces are rarely designed to accommodate the needs of informal workers, particularly women.

Ghanaian women predominantly engage in market trading, hawking, and head portering in public spaces (Amu 2005; GSS 2015). These workers access public spaces based on shared social, cultural, and economic identities deeply rooted in Ghana's communal land access systems (Berry 2018; Seligmann 2000). Hence, the increasing push for urban redevelopment often clashes with the realities of informal work (Skinner and Watson 2021). Local government policies aimed at managing informal labor to make way for redevelopment frequently lead to confrontations between informal workers and planning authorities (Asante and Helbrecht 2019). These confrontations, which can include fines, harassment, and even imprisonment, underscore the tensions between the goals of urban modernization and women's livelihoods (Akuoko et al. 2022).

The vulnerabilities of informal workers, particularly women, are also exposed in the bureaucratic hurdles they must navigate to continue their work in public spaces (Asante and Helbrecht 2019). In many cases, women are forced to pay bribes or offer sexual favors in exchange for licenses to work legally in public spaces, further deepening their exploitation and marginalization (Osei-Boateng and Ampratwum 2011). Although the Ghanaian government has implemented policies to protect workers' rights, these efforts have primarily focused on formal sector workers, leaving women in the informal economy with

little to no legal protection (Osei-Boateng and Ampratwum 2011). This neglect reinforces gender inequality, undermining women's economic contributions and limiting their full participation in the economy (Darkwah 2021).

## 2.2 | Conflicting Policy Context of Women's Work in Urban Ghana

In postcolonial Ghana, gender equality and women's empowerment are widely recognized as strategies for reducing poverty, addressing social injustice, and enhancing the impact of public and private investments. Framed as fundamental human rights and essential to sustainable development, these commitments are reflected in successive governments' promotion of formal education as a means of liberating citizens from what are often constructed as cultural constraints. These goals are legally grounded in Articles 17(1) and 17(2) of the 1992 Constitution, which guarantee equality before the law and protection from discrimination based on gender or socioeconomic status. Ghana's commitment is also evident in its ratification of international conventions and the integration of gender equality into national development frameworks.

The National Gender Policy (2015) aims to mainstream gender concerns across governance, legal, economic, and sociocultural sectors, with particular attention to the inclusion of women, girls, and other marginalized groups. Yet, entrenched gender inequalities persist, especially in access to economic resources, justice, and political representation. These disparities are rooted in longstanding patriarchal norms and colonial legacies of socialization. In response, governments have introduced various policy measures, including initiatives to promote girls' education, provide free maternal health care, expand vocational training for young women, and support financial inclusion through programs such as the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP).

Yet, urban redevelopment in Ghana, although aligned with international agendas such as UN-Habitat's Habitat III, often produces contradictory outcomes. Local governments, operating within a decentralized governance structure coordinated by the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) and supported by the Ministry of Finance, are tasked with implementing projects to promote sustainable urban growth, improve infrastructure, and enhance competitiveness. Flagship initiatives such as the Korle Lagoon Ecological Restoration Project, the Kejetia/Central Market Redevelopment, the Ghana Urban Management Pilot Project (GUMPP), and the Tamale International Airport expansion exemplify state ambitions to modernize cities and attract investment (Asante and Helbrecht 2019; Akuoko et al. 2025). However, these projects frequently result in the displacement of informal workers, many of whom rely on public spaces for their livelihoods. In areas such as Agbogbloshie and Central Kumasi, infrastructure interventions have led to forced evictions and contested removals, contradicting policy commitments to inclusivity and the protection of vulnerable populations. These processes often provoke resistance, particularly from women asserting their right to work and remain in urban public spaces (Akuoko et al. 2022).

Consequently, redevelopment sites become spaces of contestation and negotiation, where customary authorities, state actors, private investors, and informal workers engage in struggles over urban space, equity, and belonging (Akuoko et al. 2022). This tension underscores the gap between the aspirations of national gender and social protection policies and the realities of urban governance. To understand the implications of these processes, we adopt a decolonial social reproduction framework. Through this approach, we highlight the interconnections between women's paid and unpaid work and the societal structures they sustain (Guha et al. 2022). A decolonial social reproduction framework offers a valuable lens to unpack these dynamics, illuminating how gendered labor, spatial exclusion, and postcolonial state power intersect in the making and remaking of urban space.

### 3 | Theorizing Informal Women's Work Through Decolonial Social Reproduction

A decolonial perspective on social reproduction seeks to integrate and expand upon aspects of intersectional feminism and structuralist Marxism. It aims to address historical context, avoid oversimplification, incorporate diverse perspectives on reality and knowledge, tackle labor and governance issues, and engage with various interdisciplinary theoretical foundations (Dibavar 2022; Verschuur 2014). Through decolonial social reproduction, this article explores the contribution of women's informal work in public spaces as both productive and reproductive of their social, economic, cultural, and political societies (Duffy 2007; Segato and Monque 2021). Our interest is in exploring how women work to perpetuate and sustain societies but remain disadvantaged by policy formulation and implementation. More concretely, this article aims to theoretically explore how women working in public spaces demonstrate agentic tendencies as transformative political actors in cities of the Global South.

Women's work, both paid and unpaid, has been the focus of feminist economist studies (Duffy 2007). Scholars of feminist economics explore the persistence of society over time by analyzing both the human and material components of society. These women's works stretch from biological reproduction (sexuality and fertility that generate new members) to the sources of their sustenance, livelihoods, and well-being (Federici 2019; Weiss 2021). Certain scholars analyze social reproduction as reinforcing inequalities in space (Massey 1994), whereas others employ it to understand "the role of culture and ideology in the reproduction of social inequalities" (Weiss 2021, 2).

This article employs a decolonial social reproduction framework to "historicize in order not to sacrifice some women's voices for the sake of generalization" (Dibavar 2022, 453). This article analyzes both the perpetuation and protraction of modes of production and the differential structures of inequality embedded within them (Ferguson 2019). Emanating from the Marxian principle that "as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction" (Marx 1867, 711 quoted in Weiss 2021, 2). This article explores how the resources of a society are produced and distributed and further probes the question of how this production process reproduces itself

(Bhattacharya 2017; Weiss 2021). Social reproduction encompasses the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly connected with the perpetuation of daily and intergenerational life (Duffy 2007; Laslett and Brenner 1989), and the addition of a decolonial perspective enables us to explore the fundamental disagreements and historical differences that have been overlooked by feminist scholars so far (Dibavar 2022; Verschuur 2014).

Further, scholars conceptualize reproduction into two dimensions to broaden its definitions to encompass (1) maintaining the existing life and reproducing the next generation (Bhattacharya 2017; Laslett and Brenner 1989) and (2) perpetuating reproduction systems of gendered inequalities concerning but different from the reproduction systems of class inequality where the family is recognized as an organization for accomplishing social reproduction (Federici 2019; Fraser 2017). A more recent approach to social reproduction centers on the lives and livelihoods of women affected by the financialized global economy (Bhattacharya 2017; Mezzadri 2019; Weiss 2021).

Our article explores women in paid work, particularly in cities in the Global South. Dibavar (2022) asserts that social reproduction is not only about showing how paid and unpaid work impact women's societal experiences. Hence, our article also considers how these factors are tied to the broader economic system, especially regarding property ownership and land relations. We aim to highlight women's varied social reproductive work by connecting it to various intersectional factors such as ethnic origin, economic status, and migrant status (Bhattacharya 2017).

## 4 | Study Design and Methodology

### 4.1 | Case Selection

This article is a comparative case study of two public spaces in two major cities in Ghana: Agbogbloshie in Accra and Central Kumasi in Kumasi. Agbogbloshie is an informal public space near the central business district (CBD) of Accra, Ghana's capital city. The Ga-Adangbe patrilineal community in Accra are the customary custodians and owners of the lands in Agbogbloshie. The land was, however, compulsorily acquired by the state in 1963 for the Korle Lagoon Recreational project, but the project was never implemented (Akuoko et al. 2025). Women working in Agbogbloshie are mostly the wives, sisters, daughters, or relations of men working in the adjoining metal scrapyard. These women are immigrants from other parts of Ghana or sub-Saharan Africa, mainly the north. The women are youthful and work as food vendors, beverage sellers, hawkers, or head porters (kayaye). Onion traders, scrap workers, and various market traders occupied Agbogbloshie until a relocation and demolition exercise in July 2021. There has been no ongoing project since the demolition; the onion traders relocated to a new location, but scrap workers, head porters, and most food and beverage sellers continue to work in Agbogbloshie.

Central Kumasi is a historical trading space in the middle belt of Ghana, which is in the center of the second-largest city in the country. The Asante ethnic community customarily owns and

oversees lands under the leadership of the *Asantehene*. Central Kumasi has hosted the Kumasi Central Market for centuries and the Kejetia transport terminal for decades. The market is predominantly female, and trading spots are transferred through the matrilineal inheritance system of the Asantes to other women in families. In 2015, persistent fire outbreaks, congestion, and desire for modernity led the Asantehene and the local government officials of the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly to petition the state government to commence the implementation of the Kejetia/Central Market Redevelopment Project (KCMRP). The proposed project caused a demolition of the preexisting central market and Kejetia terminal to redevelop Central Kumasi in three phases. The Brazilian government funded and completed the first phase of the KCMRP, handing it over to a section of the workers in 2019, whereas the second phase, financed by the government of the United Kingdom, is halted due to national financial restructuring; the third phase has not yet been commissioned.

The two cases were selected based on their shared delineation as public spaces on the planning schemes of their various metropolitan assemblies and their management as lands with multiple regulatory governance and ownership as customary lands. Women working in both Agbogbloshie and Central Kumasi are mainly informal workers.

## 4.2 | Methods and Approach

This article adopted a comparative case study design to examine the experiences of women working informally in public spaces, focusing on Agbogbloshie in Accra and Central Kumasi. The aim was to identify both commonalities and divergences across sites to assess the potential generalizability of the mechanisms shaping these experiences (Yin 2003). Guided by an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell 1998; Bryman 2016), the research prioritized participants' perspectives and the subjective meanings they attach to their lived realities. Multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed to enable triangulation and ensure validity.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews (40 in total), weekly transect walks, participant observation, two focus group discussions (one per site), field surveys, informal conversations, and stakeholder consultations. Secondary data sources included policy documents, gender and labor policies, planning reports, newspaper articles, television broadcasts, and relevant websites on informal work in public space under redevelopment in Ghana. Fieldwork lasted 12 weeks (February 1 to April 30, 2023), with 6 weeks spent in each case site. For both sites, initial access was established through development planning officers in the respective local assemblies and customary authorities, followed by consultations with officials from the Land Use and Spatial Planning Authority. These engagements provided important context on the proposed and ongoing redevelopment projects and revealed the contested roles of state actors, customary authorities, and informal workers.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted to encourage a conversational flow that allowed

participants to share personal accounts of productive and reproductive work in the context of urban public space redevelopment and how they navigated work life. Units of inquiry were identified through purposive and snowball sampling rather than random selection. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of individuals with specific, relevant knowledge, such as community leaders and affected workers. Snowball sampling was particularly effective in identifying users of public spaces who had experienced similar forms of displacement or eviction resulting from a redevelopment proposal or implementation. This approach helped capture a broad range of perspectives, particularly from those whose experiences might otherwise have remained undocumented.

To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, data were triangulated across interview transcripts, contemporaneous field observations, and documentary sources such as gender and labor policies and planning notices. Interview quotations were compared with the relevant documents and on-site field notes to confirm timelines, corroborate or problematize accounts, and refine analytical categories; discrepancies were resolved through research team discussion and, where necessary, targeted follow-up.

Upon achieving data saturation, the authors replayed all audio recordings and transcribed the interviews to clean the dataset and address any evident flaws. The transcripts were then uploaded into the MAXQDA software for thematic analysis. We began by assigning codes to recurrent segments and evidential statements, allowing us to organize the material into emerging thematic groupings of gendered division of labor; resilience and agency; customary practices; (de)colonial ideologies; and (re)evolving practices. Once connections among these recurring themes were established, we analyzed the findings through the lens of the research question and theoretical framework. These findings were further situated within the reviewed literature, with particular attention to the decolonial social reproduction theoretical framing adopted in the study.

The first author's positionality as an Asante woman with both personal and academic ties to Kumasi enabled an empathetic and contextually grounded approach to data collection and interpretation. In contrast, the second author, situated in a Global North academic context, provided a critical external perspective that served as a reflective sounding board during the analysis and interpretation of findings.

## 5 | Results—Gendered Inequalities and Agency in Informal Work: Agbogbloshie and Central Kumasi

This section discusses the findings in Agbogbloshie and Central Kumasi to highlight the differentiated experiences of women working in public spaces, focusing on how these differences and the similarities across sites are shaped and reproduced through ongoing social, economic, and political changes associated with the redevelopment of public spaces in Ghanaian cities.

In Agbogbloshie, the women respondents were in two categories: (1) migrant women with established food and beverage selling

ventures and (2) migrant women with little or no capital engaged in street hawking or head portering. In Central Kumasi, three distinct but interdependent categories of women informal workers emerged: (1) Asante women with inherited customary rights to shops and stalls based on matrilineal kinship ties; (2) Asante and non-Asante women without matrilineal claims who accessed space through informal rental arrangements; and (3) migrant women with little or no capital engaged in street vending, hawking, or head portering (kayaye). These groups varied in terms of their legitimacy, economic status, and social standing, yet were interconnected through informal systems of access and mutual dependence. Redevelopment processes disrupted these arrangements by privileging recognized shop owners and excluding mobile and street vendors, thereby reshaping access, undermining existing informal networks, and altering income-generating opportunities and livelihood security in both cases. However, all categories of women in both Agboghloshie and Central Kumasi remain actively working in the space.

## 5.1 | Gendered Division of Informal Labor

The gendered division of labor in Agboghloshie and Central Kumasi underscores persistent gendered roles and inequalities within postcolonial societies (Segato and Monque 2021). In both locations, informal work is predominantly gendered, with physically demanding jobs such as scrap work and bulk onion trading reserved for men. At the same time, women are relegated to roles perceived as less strenuous, such as food vending and head portering. These roles are not merely a reflection of physical capability but are deeply rooted in societal perceptions of gender and reinforced by cultural and structural inequalities.

In Agboghloshie, where scrap work and bulk onion trading dominate, male respondents emphasized that such work is too demanding for women. Women were more engaged in selling food and beverages or working as head porters, which they deemed more suitable for their capabilities. According to respondents, women were perceived as lacking the physical strength required for male-dominated tasks. This assertion reveals how societal norms restrict women's access to certain types of work. For instance, the leadership of the onion traders' association explicitly excluded women from bulk trading, reinforcing gendered barriers. As one leader stated:

The issue is that this is our work, and not all of us agree with women coming here and doing what we do. We will sell to the women in small sacks so they can sell along the roads and in markets. Simple! We cannot work with women here and sit together with them. However, if a woman has money and wants any of us to import and sell on her behalf, we will do that for her with no problems at all, but to allow a woman to come and work with us and sit with us like we are doing here—never will that happen. The only thing we allow them to do is sell water and food for the workers here.

(Secretary of Onion Traders Association, Agboghloshie, February 16, 2023)

This exclusion highlights a structural defense of male-dominated workspaces and a clear demarcation of what constitutes “men's work” versus “women's work.” These distinctions are not arbitrary but are deeply intertwined with access to capital, resources, and control over public spaces—factors historically shaped by colonial power structures (Duffy 2007; Segato and Monque 2021). Colonial systems often entrenched gendered labor roles, framing physically intensive tasks as “masculine” while relegating “feminine” tasks to caregiving and domestic spheres (Fraser 2017). This legacy continues to influence perceptions of capability and suitability in the informal economy.

In Central Kumasi, women's participation in informal work is rooted in ancestral traditions. Many women inherit lucrative trading ventures, often passed down through matrilineal lines. A market queen representing cloth sellers explained how her family had maintained this trade over generations, with women prioritizing market work over formal education. She noted:

My great-grandmother was a market queen of cloth traders. My mother took over the cloth trading business and introduced us to the trade. Our ancestors provided formal education only to males, while females were raised to focus on the market, marriage, and household chores. Although times are changing, and some women now prefer formal education, many still consider selling in the market to be women's work.

(Market queen, Central Kumasi, March 27, 2023)

This inheritance of market roles in Central Kumasi reflects a dynamic where women exercise greater agency than women in Agboghloshie. Moreover, economic hardships and rising unemployment in the formal sector have led to increased male participation in the traditionally female-dominated role of trading. A fish seller observed:

At first, we were only women traders; there were no men in the market. However, today, we see men selling inside the market because of economic hardships. At first, men engaged in auto fitting, mechanics, and other jobs. They considered market work a job for women. However, today, men supply us with fish, garden eggs, and even tomatoes.

(Fish seller, Central Kumasi, March 27, 2023)

Men's encroachment into these spaces is often seen as temporary, driven by economic necessity rather than a shift in societal norms. A yam seller recounted:

I know one young man who completed Nursing Training College but has not yet been stationed. Instead of staying at home, he decided to be a hawker. This hardworking guy gets his daily feeding money from carrying goods rather than depending on his mother's rice with the excuse that there are no jobs in the country.

(Yam seller, Central Kumasi, April 11, 2023)

Despite men entering these roles, women face significant barriers when attempting to access traditionally male-dominated work. In Agboghloshie, women's participation in jobs such as scrap work remains heavily restricted, as male-dominated associations actively defend these boundaries. This duality highlights a complex interplay where men's involvement in "women's work" becomes normalized, whereas women's access to "men's work" is staunchly resisted.

A decolonial analysis of this dynamic reveals the enduring influence of colonial legacies in shaping the informal economy. By privileging certain types of labor as "masculine," colonial systems entrenched inequalities that continue to disadvantage women (Dibavar 2022). These perceptions intersect with systemic barriers, such as limited access to capital and control over public spaces, to maintain gendered hierarchies. For example, male-dominated associations, such as the onion traders in Agboghloshie, leverage control over resources and spaces to exclude women, perpetuating a cycle of economic marginalization.

Therefore, although the gender boundaries within informal work are blurring in some contexts, as seen with men entering women-dominated spaces in Central Kumasi, they remain staunchly defended in others, such as excluding women from male-dominated jobs in Agboghloshie. This duality underscores the persistence of colonial power structures in shaping informal economies, where gendered labor roles are not only a product of societal norms but also a reflection of deeper structural inequalities (Verschuur 2014). Addressing these disparities requires challenging the colonial legacies that sustain them and reimagining access to work, resources, and public spaces through a lens of gender equality.

## 5.2 | Women's Agency and Resilience in Work

Marriage, childbirth, and associated care work pose significant barriers for women in both their homes and workplaces, as recognized in the national gender policy framework. Women in Agboghloshie and Central Kumasi described how societal expectations placed the burden of childcare and domestic responsibilities almost entirely on them after marriage. Younger women in Agboghloshie highlighted the social importance of maintaining a respectable household, emphasizing that a woman's societal status depends on her ability to manage domestic duties. They explained that their cultural upbringing instilled a responsibility to protect their households from external interference. Each morning, women were expected to clean their homes, feed their children and male family members, and ensure that household essentials were prepared before heading out to earn income. Many women with infants were observed working with their babies strapped to their backs or placed nearby in their workspaces.

Women respondents had normalized selling in public spaces while simultaneously caring for their children. One respondent stressed the importance of managing time efficiently to ensure she could return home to prepare meals before her husband's arrival, describing this as the hallmark of a good woman. Balancing unpaid domestic work as mothers and social obligations as wives

with paid work activities was described as exhausting. However, women maintained that change was unlikely due to their husbands' lack of support and recognition. A food vendor illustrated this sentiment:

Sometimes, I just sit down to look at him and listen to him. All I ask him is, "Does he truly believe that I do not do anything in our home? I provide food every day." Sister, if you put anything on fire and plan to prepare soup for the home, 100 cedis will not be enough ... It would be less hurtful if the men would see and appreciate it, but they do not, so women struggle silently because of our children. If they want to play the head of the family, then all financial burden should be on men; whatever children eat and wear to school would be their burden, and I would cook, clean, wash, and serve their family. However, now, women are doing it all.

(Interview, food vendor, Agboghloshie, February 16, 2023)

In Central Kumasi, this dynamic was corroborated by a key informant, who explained that women were expected to fulfill both customary and modern roles. He remarked:

The roles can be divided into two, the customary cultural role, and the modern role. For example, a woman who works as a banker, lawyer, soldier etc. works like a man would but would also perform home duties like washing, bathing the children, and cooking, which comes naturally in women. A woman who refuses to perform duties as a woman loses respect in our society. A woman who is also dependent on a man is not respected. You must do your things and earn your own money. When you do not like to work as a woman, and you depend on a man for everything, he will not respect you because you have sold your freedom. Even your fellow women will not respect you.

(Interview, Manhyia Palace Historian, Central Kumasi, April 05, 2023)

In responding to why women must have paid work in addition to their unpaid work, some respondents in Agboghloshie were quick to say that a woman cannot just stay home and depend on a man because that can give men the opportunity to send women out of their homes whenever they want because the women would become burdens. To them, hard-working women can stay anywhere without difficulties. Citing herself as a hard-working woman, a beverage seller said, "I am only 18, but I still go to the north to work during yam season. Look at my legs and feet. I have my scars to show, but I come to sell water when the yam season is over because I do not want to depend on anyone." (Focused group discussion, young women, Agboghloshie, February 16, 2023).

By contrast, the redevelopment of Central Kumasi has dismantled the locally negotiated arrangements that once enabled diverse groups of women to sustain their livelihoods within an unequal yet interdependent market. New rules after redevelopment exclude the second and third categories of non-shop-owning

women, disrupting informal arrangements, cooperation, and spatial organization. Prioritizing those who can afford permanent shops has fragmented product clustering, reduced customer access, and lowered sales, deepening gendered and class-based exclusions. The third category of women, those with the least capital, now face the greatest precarity. Workers in Agboghloshie, however, have so far avoided comparable displacement.

Despite these divergent experiences, women in both sites value the autonomy and respect earned through paid work. Younger participants focus on contributing to their households and enhancing their social standing, whereas older women stress the need to provide for their families. Viewed through a decolonial lens, their dual engagement in paid and unpaid labor reflects agency rather than mere accommodation. By integrating income-earning activities with care responsibilities, women challenge the capitalist separation of production and reproduction. Informal work thus becomes a space of creative resilience and subtle resistance, allowing women to navigate and contest intersecting inequalities of gender, labor, and social expectation.

### 5.3 | Customary Beliefs and Shifting Norms

Women's work is indirectly shaped by customary gender roles in society. These roles have extended into public spaces, influencing the work women and men can do. Workers in Agboghloshie explained their stance on women's work as a part of them that is embedded in their ethnic customs. These women were required to play their roles in the homes and earn incomes without compromising their duties as wives, mothers, and sisters. Therefore, women transfer these customary expectations to their new environments, fearing that failure to conform to these norms will disgrace themselves and their entire households.

Similarly, women in Central Kumasi confirmed that they were willingly doing their paid and unpaid work without complaints because it is their duty as women to ensure that their households and children are well catered for. To them, children are heritage, so it was up to them to ensure they left a good inheritance for their daughters and granddaughters. The Asante women, who form the dominant community in Central Kumasi, believed in raising their daughters to understand their trade so that their children could take over the trade in their old age, as they took over from their mothers. Some respondents in Central Kumasi also noted that regarding unpaid household work, times have changed, and men need to contribute and help. Stressing the current economic hardships in Ghana, a trader explained that if men could not secure paid work and were unemployed, they would not have to stay home and do nothing because they could cook, clean, and wash like women.

However, norms surrounding gender roles are not static. In Central Kumasi, respondents noted a growing acceptance of men contributing to unpaid domestic work, especially amid economic hardships. Nevertheless, this shift remains contentious. Cultural perceptions often frame men's involvement in traditionally "feminine" tasks as demeaning. One corn dough

seller recounted how societal gossip discouraged her husband from assisting her publicly:

He often comes to help me here at dawn, but when I notice more people arriving, I ask him to leave because people gossip about such matters.

Interview, corn dough seller, Central Kumasi, April 11, 2023

In both cases and all responses, ethnic customs strongly influenced women's work, yet women in Central Kumasi demonstrate greater flexibility in navigating cultural norms. Their matrilineal system provides a degree of empowerment, enabling them to negotiate change while maintaining cultural practices that support their livelihoods. Conversely, women in Agboghloshie perceive these norms as largely non-negotiable.

#### 5.3.1 | Role of Women in Perpetuating Women's Work

Women in informal work deliberately teach their children the concept of women's work. When asked how they came to accept the different gendered roles, the common response of respondents was that their mothers trained them to be well-mannered women who did not bring shame to their homes. In Agboghloshie, most female respondents emphasized that wives were expected to behave acceptably and were responsible for teaching their daughters and sisters the customs of their community. The unmarried women were guided by the married women so that they could also secure decent husbands.

Younger women in Agboghloshie were concerned about comporting themselves in a certain manner because their mothers had taught them so. In a focused group discussion with some young women hawking beverages, one respondent commented as follows:

Our mothers have taught us since we are young so that when we marry, we will not disgrace the family. A woman must always keep her husband and children well so that the outside world will not find any problems with her home. She must always be in charge.

Focused group discussion, young women, Agboghloshie, February 16, 2023

Women working in Central Kumasi were taught, knowingly or unknowingly, by other women to perpetuate the concept of women's work. In turn, they passed on this teaching to younger women. The case of the market queen of cloth traders substantiates this argument. She explained that, like her grandmother, all the women in her family are traders in cloth. Her great-grandmother started selling cloth and taught her daughter, who passed down the trade to her children. They continued this tradition, teaching other women in their lineage. She emphasized that as the women in their family grew up, they learned they had a profitable trading spot in Central Kumasi. Consequently, they focused less on academic studies in school and more on the income they earned, even while attending school. In addition, the females were required to go to the market

on weekends and during vacations to help. Because they enjoyed spending their time in the market, their interest was in trading.

### 5.3.2 | Motivations for Women's Informal Work

Women in Agboghloshie and Central Kumasi demonstrated an understanding of the challenges women faced in formal employment as they balanced their paid and unpaid work. A respondent from Agboghloshie highlighted the case of her daughter, who works as a nurse, contrasting it with her work in the public space. She pointed out that although women now have opportunities for formal employment, the burden of unpaid work remains unchanged. She emphasized that women in formal jobs often face more difficulties than those in informal work due to the rigidities of formal employment compared to the flexibility of informal arrangements. She explained that a woman working formally had to abide by customary norms, which restricted her from circumventing her daily activities. However, working informally gave women the room to maneuver and do all they needed to keep their homes while earning income. She summed up her thoughts as follows:

I am always worried about the future of my daughters. Suppose they must leave work at 5 pm and live far from the workplace, then they will get home late, cook, clean and sleep for the next day's activities. Some of the girls, especially the nurses, can go to work at dawn. They will suffer too much ... women are born like that. We all suffer when I think of it; it is more difficult to have a corporate job. It is not easy at all. Maybe it means cooking at dawn before leaving for work, but that is not easy.

Interview, food vendor, Agboghloshie, February 16, 2023

To women in informal work, their choice of work provides a resort to women responsible for housework and the financial responsibility of catering for their households. A trader shared her story of survival as a mother, noting that even before the death of her husband, she received assistance from other women in her family. She said her sisters had called her to sell beside them in the market because she was a woman and explained:

... every day, by the time I close, I would get what I and the children will eat and something small to save, so I have managed to take care of all the children. In this line of work, you see money daily, unlike in government jobs, where you typically only receive payment at the end of the month. Moreover, one thing about me is that when I gave birth, I never stayed in the house for long; in two months, you will see me with my new baby at the market, and I will be working, so within the shortest time, they will grow.

Interview, fish seller, Central Kumasi, March 31, 2023

These narratives reveal the critical role of informal work in providing women economic security and the flexibility to fulfill their unpaid domestic responsibilities. Although women

perpetuate customary norms, younger generations reinterpret these values in response to evolving economic realities. In Central Kumasi, respondents expressed aspirations to blend economic independence with cultural practices while advocating for men's involvement in traditionally "feminine" roles. These shifts suggest an ongoing negotiation of redefining customary and coloniality practices.

The enduring influence of colonial ideologies that dichotomize productive and reproductive labor is evident such that women's unpaid domestic roles and their dominance in informal work reflect colonial frameworks that marginalized African women's economic contributions. At the same time, the presence of men in "women's work" disrupts these colonial legacies by challenging the rigidity of gendered labor divisions in Ghana. In both cases, women demonstrate resilience and agency, navigating the constraints of customary beliefs while asserting their independence within a changing socioeconomic landscape. By reinterpreting cultural values and fostering incremental change, they challenge the colonial narratives that separate economic and reproductive spheres, crafting a more integrated understanding of gender and labor in urban Ghana.

## 6 | Discussion—Decolonial Insights Into Social Reproduction and Gendered Inequalities in Informal Work in Ghana

Our findings respond to the question of how women's work in public spaces is organized to sustain social reproduction in cities of the Global South. They align with two interrelated dimensions of social reproduction. The first involves the maintenance of daily life and the reproduction of future generations; the second concerns the reproduction of gendered inequalities. Together, these dimensions illuminate how women's paid and unpaid labor not only sustains everyday life but also links their experiences to broader political-economic structures, including property ownership, land relations, and migration in Ghana. These intersecting dynamics generate differentiated experiences and positions among women, illustrating the multiple ways in which gendered inequalities are produced and sustained.

The public organization of informal work in these contexts also challenges the masculine colonial construct of labor and space (Segato and Monque 2021) by recognizing women as both productive and reproductive agents. These dual roles support not only the survival of households and communities (Bhattacharya 2017; Laslett and Brenner 1989) but also sustain gendered hierarchies that are distinct from, yet often entangled with, class-based inequalities (Federici 2019; Fraser 2017). Women engaged in informal work in public spaces perform activities that simultaneously address productive and reproductive needs, reflecting insights from Federici (2019) and Ferguson (2019). Their labor contests dominant portrayals of informal workers as passive or vulnerable, instead revealing forms of agency and resilience embedded in everyday urban practices.

Linking women's work experiences to broader political-economic structures such as property ownership, land relations, and migration further elucidates how these intersecting systems generate differentiated gendered inequalities across Ghanaian urban

contexts. In Central Kumasi, economic opportunities are closely tied to customary land tenure and property regimes, which privilege women with inherited claims and financial capacity to secure permanent shop spaces. Although all categories of women continue to work in the public spaces, this spatial and legal stratification disproportionately excludes migrant women and mobile vendors, whose migrant status and lack of recognized property rights increase their vulnerability to displacement. By contrast, Agbogbloshie's more fluid migration patterns and informal tenure arrangements create a relatively inclusive environment that enables diverse groups of women, including recent migrants, to access livelihood opportunities with less exclusion. However, their use of contested space remains perpetually precarious. These contrasting experiences highlight the critical role of land governance, social status, and mobility in shaping gendered inequality in urban Ghana.

As noted by Duffy (2007) and Weiss (2021), unpaid work extends beyond biological reproduction to enhance household well-being. Informal workers in both Agbogbloshie and Central Kumasi acknowledge their dual contributions through paid and unpaid labor, emphasizing their importance within the two dimensions of social reproduction. Informal work empowers these women by fostering financial independence and self-reliance, essential components for achieving gender equality. Many respondents stressed self-sufficiency, reflecting their active engagement in broader socioeconomic systems. Yet, the findings reveal that informal work reinforces differentiated structures of inequality, which can be critically understood through a decolonial social reproduction lens that recognizes historical and lived differences among women (Dibavar 2022).

Moreover, the financialized global economy continues to reshape the conditions under which informal workers operate in both Agbogbloshie and Central Kumasi. Redevelopment-induced displacement and evictions, driven by urban modernization policies aligned with global investment imperatives, have intensified economic precarity. Women, in particular, face longer working hours with stagnant or declining earnings. In Agbogbloshie, the eviction of scrap and onion workers disrupted established networks, leading to the loss of key customers for female traders. Similarly, in Central Kumasi, traders were forced to rebuild clientele after state-led relocations. These disruptions are symptomatic of broader neoliberal governance trends that favor market-led redevelopment over social protection.

The expansion of informal work under such conditions challenges the relevance of colonial-era local government bylaws that continue to prohibit hawking and street trading. Rooted in imported urban governance models, these regulations inadequately reflect the socioeconomic realities of those dependent on public space for survival. There is an urgent need to revise these bylaws through inclusive, nonconflicting policy frameworks that center informal workers, particularly women, as legitimate urban economic actors. Despite adverse conditions, women continue to display economic, cultural, and social dynamism through informal practices of labor, care, and collective organization (Seligmann 2000). Informal work also affords flexibility, enabling women to navigate the interdependencies of paid and unpaid responsibilities, such as childcare (Duffy 2007; Amporfut et al. 2018). Recognizing and integrating this reality into urban

policy and planning remains critical to achieving socially just and economically inclusive cities.

Further, gender norms are gradually shifting through policy efforts and women's agency, as evidenced by the study's findings, highlighting the imperative to recognize and support women's contributions to households, production systems, and national economies (Amu 2005; Mezzadri 2019). The dual dimensions of social reproduction, sustaining life and perpetuating inequality, are especially visible in the lives of women informal workers who straddle both productive and reproductive roles in public spaces. This reality underscores the need to embed informality within urban planning and policy frameworks, particularly in cities across the Global South. Urban policies must move beyond punitive and exclusionary approaches by explicitly recognizing informal work as a legitimate and essential component of the urban economy.

A gender-sensitive and decolonial planning agenda should prioritize inclusive public space governance, invest in infrastructure that supports informal livelihoods, and institutionalize participatory decision-making processes that include women informal workers as policy actors. Women's collective agency, self-organization, and everyday practices offer critical insights for designing equitable and contextually grounded policy interventions. Adopting a decolonial social reproduction framework challenges Eurocentric understandings of informality and enables more nuanced, situated responses to intersecting inequalities. Integrating informal work into urban policy not only promotes gender equality and decent work but also repositions informal workers as central to building inclusive, livable, and just cities.

## 7 | Conclusion

This article set out to examine how women's work in public spaces sustains social reproduction in cities of the Global South, using informal women working in two Ghanaian cities as a case study. We demonstrated, through empirical analysis, that the separation of productive and reproductive labor is a colonial construct that fails to capture the complex realities of women engaged in urban informal work. The findings reveal that women's labor is simultaneously productive and reproductive, and that it is precisely within this entanglement that urban life and social reproduction are maintained. Informal work provides women with social identity, economic agency, and flexibility to balance income generation with caregiving responsibilities, positioning it as central to the functioning of urban economies.

Despite its importance, women's informal work remains undervalued and largely invisible within national labor frameworks, reproducing its marginalization. Through this study, we demonstrate that women's informal labor challenges gendered, cultural, and institutional constraints, yet inequalities in access to resources and decision-making continue to restrict their financial autonomy and social recognition. These findings underscore how women's empowerment in public spaces is intimately tied to broader processes of national development, calling for urban policies that decolonize planning frameworks and foreground the lived realities of informal workers.

By drawing on decolonial social reproduction theory, we extend feminist analyses of labor by revealing how informal work in African urban contexts bridges the artificial divide between production and reproduction. This contributes to gender scholarship by demonstrating that informality is not a marginal or residual category but a constitutive feature of urban economies through which women sustain households, communities, and the broader political economy. This assertion challenges modernist and colonial-inflected assumptions within both feminist and urban studies that position informal work as secondary or transitional. Nevertheless, the study's qualitative and context-specific design limits the generalizability of its findings beyond the Ghanaian context. We call for engagement with future research that explores comparative analyses across different cities in the Global South to examine how varying policy regimes and cultural contexts shape women's informal work and its relationship to social reproduction.

In conclusion, we advance feminist theories in this article by situating women's informal work at the center of urban political economy and social reproduction. It argues that gender equality and inclusive urban development cannot be achieved without recognizing and valuing women's contributions across productive and reproductive domains. Integrating women's informal labor into feminist scholarship and urban policy is thus not only a matter of social justice but also essential for building equitable and sustainable cities.

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## Consent

We obtained informed consent from all respondents and stakeholders included in this study.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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