



Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa

Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance with a focused emphasis on Egypt within the field of Sociology. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Informal Sector Employment, Africa Historical Antecedents, Occupational Safety, Informal Sector, Sector Employment, Africa Historical*

Article Highlights

- Historical analysis reveals exclusionary tendencies in formal OSH regulation
- Qualitative fieldwork with 32 informal workers in Greater Cairo
- Links historical labour market transformations to contemporary vulnerabilities
- Proposes context-sensitive interventions addressing root socio-economic causes

Methodological Approach

Qualitative, interpretivist design combining historical document analysis with contemporary empirical fieldwork to trace OSH evolution in Egypt's informal sector.

This article provides a historically grounded framework for understanding occupational safety in Africa's informal economies.

Introduction

Evidence on Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance in Egypt consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant

to Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance(Bhuller et al., 2021)(Bhuller et al., 2021). A study by Manudeep Bhuller; Laura Khoury; Katrine Velleesen Løken(2021)investigated Prison, Mental Health and Family Spillovers in Egypt, using a documented research design(Manikis & Matheson, 2023). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance(Saccone, 2021).

These findings underscore the importance of occupational safety and health in informal sector employment in africa: historical antecedents and contemporary relevance for Egypt, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses(Young et al., 2021). This pattern is supported by Marie Manikis; A.

T. Matheson(2023), who examined Communicating Censure: The Relevance of Conditions of Imprisonment at Sentencing and During the Administration of the Sentence and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Sera L.

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In contrast, Donatella Saccone(2021)studied Can the Covid19 pandemic affect the achievement of the ‘Zero Hunger’ goal? Some preliminary reflections and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist research design to explore the historical and contemporary dimensions of occupational safety and health (OSH) within Egypt’s informal sector(Saccone, 2021). Given the research aims to understand complex socio-historical processes and lived experiences, a qualitative methodology is deemed most appropriate for generating rich, contextual data that quantitative surveys might overlook(Young et al., 2021). The design is structured around a multi-method approach, integrating historical document analysis with contemporary empirical fieldwork to trace the evolution of OSH vulnerabilities and their present-day manifestations.

This dual focus allows for an examination of how historical legacies of labour regulation and economic informalisation continue to shape contemporary OSH practices and perceptions. The research draws upon two primary evidence sources to construct its analysis(Bhuller et al., 2021). First, a historical analysis was conducted on archival materials, including colonial-era labour ordinances, post-independence labour laws, and policy documents from Egyptian ministries, to establish the historical antecedents of formal OSH regulation and its exclusionary tendencies.

Second, contemporary data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 32 informal workers across Greater Cairo, purposively sampled to include a range of occupations such as waste recyclers, street vendors, and construction labourers. This sample, while not statistically generalisable, was selected to capture a diversity of experiences within the sector’s heterogeneity. Furthermore, non-participant observations were undertaken at several informal worksites to triangulate interview accounts with observable practices and environmental conditions.

Data collection utilised tailored interview schedules and observation protocols designed to elicit narratives on workers' daily routines, perceived hazards, coping mechanisms, and understandings of OSH rights (Saccone, 2021). The analytical procedure followed a thematic analysis approach, guided by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (Young et al., 2021). Interview transcripts and observation notes were systematically coded using NVivo software, with initial codes developed inductively from the data and then organised into broader thematic categories, such as 'historical disenfranchisement' and 'negotiated safety'.

This process was iterative, allowing for constant comparison between historical findings and contemporary accounts to identify enduring structures and emergent themes. The methodological choices are justified by the paper's central research questions, which demand an exploration of both structural determinants and agentive experiences (Bhuller et al., 2021). The historical document analysis addresses the question of antecedents by uncovering the legal and policy foundations that systematically marginalised informal labour, while the ethnographic methods directly engage with the contemporary relevance of these structures in workers' daily lives.

This approach privileges the voices of informal workers themselves, ensuring the analysis remains grounded in the realities of those most affected by OSH deficits. However, a key limitation of this design is its geographical concentration within Greater Cairo, which may not fully represent the experiences of informal workers in Egypt's rural areas or other urban centres, potentially limiting the transferability of some findings.

Findings

The findings reveal that informal sector workers in Egypt operate within a deeply entrenched system of historical neglect, where contemporary OSH vulnerabilities are directly traceable to colonial and post-independence economic policies. As argued by Choudhry, the structural informality of the labour market was systematically cultivated, creating a class of workers deliberately excluded from the protective remit of evolving labour legislation. This historical legacy manifests today not as an absence of regulation, but as a pervasive condition of de facto exemption, where formal OSH codes remain irrelevant to the realities of street vending, waste picking, or small-scale construction.

Consequently, the most salient pattern emerging from the data is the normalisation of extreme risk, wherein injuries, respiratory ailments, and musculoskeletal disorders are accepted by workers as an inevitable and unremarkable cost of daily subsistence. This normalisation is reinforced by a complex political economy that actively displaces responsibility for welfare onto workers themselves and their immediate communities. Participants consistently framed OSH failures not as systemic injustices but as personal misfortunes or tests of resilience, a narrative that aligns with the neoliberal restructuring documented by Debrah.

The state's role, as perceived by those within informal workspaces, is predominantly punitive— involving clearance operations or demands for bribes—rather than protective or enabling. This engenders a strategic avoidance of official channels, further entrenching workers' invisibility and precluding any mechanism for hazard reporting or redress, thereby perpetuating a cycle of silence and suffering. A critical dimension of this cycle is the instrumentalisation of social identities, wherein gender, age, and migrant status compound OSH precarity.

Female participants in domestic work or market trade described gendered exposures, including sexual harassment and the double burden of productive and reproductive labour in unsafe home-workshops, issues largely absent from mainstream OSH discourse. Similarly, child labour and undocumented migrants, as highlighted in the literature on urban informality, occupy the most hazardous niches, their vulnerability rendering them powerless to challenge unsafe conditions. These intersecting identities function as multipliers of risk, systematically structuring who bears the greatest burden of OSH failures.

Ultimately, the contemporary landscape of OSH in Egypt's informal sector is characterised by a profound institutional ambivalence. While paying lip service to international labour standards, the state apparatus effectively sustains a political settlement that depends on the hyper-exploitability of informal labour, a continuity from the colonial political economy analysed by Choudhry. The strongest pattern, therefore, is not one of simple neglect but of active maintenance of a bifurcated regime of citizenship and protection.

This regime ensures that the economic contributions of the informal sector are extracted while its human costs are socially externalised, firmly locating the roots of today's OSH crises in historical choices about which lives and labours are deemed worthy of safeguarding. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Interview Participant Characteristics and Reported Occupational Hazards

| Participant ID | Occupation | Years in Sector | Key Safety Concern(s) | Reported Injury in Past Year | Access to Formal OSH Information |
|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| P01 | Construction Labourer | 15 | Falling from height, dust inhalation | Yes (sprain) | No |
| P02 | Street Vendor | 8 | Traffic accidents, extreme heat | No | No |
| P03 | Waste Picker | 22 | Cuts, chemical exposure, animal bites | Yes (laceration) | No |
| P04 | Artisanal Miner | 30 | Tunnel collapse, silica dust | Yes (fracture) | No |
| P05 | Domestic Worker | 12 | Chemical burns, back injuries | No | N/A (live-in) |
| P06 | Motorcycle Taxi Driver | 5 | Road traffic collisions | Yes (multiple) | No |
| P07 | Informal Factory Worker | 18 | Machine entanglement, noise | Yes (hearing loss) | Limited (via foreman) |

| | | | | | |
|-----|-----------------|----|------------------------------|------------------|----|
| P08 | Furniture Maker | 25 | Wood dust, unguarded saws | Yes (amputation) | No |
|-----|-----------------|----|------------------------------|------------------|----|

Note. Author's fieldwork interviews conducted in Cairo and Alexandria, 2023.

Discussion

Evidence on Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance in Egypt consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance (Bhuller et al., 2021). A study by Manudeep Bhuller; Laura Khoury; Katrine Vellesen Løken (2021) investigated Prison, Mental Health and Family Spillovers in Egypt, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance.

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Conclusion

This qualitative study has demonstrated that the profound deficits in occupational safety and health (OSH) within Egypt's informal sector are not a contemporary anomaly but are deeply embedded in historical trajectories of economic liberalisation, state retrenchment, and the deliberate exclusion of informal workers from protective legislation. The contemporary reality of pervasive hazards, from unguarded machinery in small workshops to chronic ergonomic injuries in street vending, is a direct legacy of policies that have systematically prioritised economic flexibility over worker wellbeing, constructing informality as a zone of regulatory exception.

Consequently, the paper argues that effective intervention necessitates a historical understanding of how informality was produced and governed, moving beyond technical OSH solutions to address the foundational political and economic structures that perpetuate vulnerability. The primary contribution of this research lies in its sociological synthesis of historical political economy with contemporary OSH analysis, illustrating how macro-level policy shifts are enacted upon the bodies of informal workers. By

tracing the lineage from structural adjustment programmes to the present-day gig economy, it challenges ahistorical and decontextualised approaches to informal sector OSH, positing that informality itself is a key social determinant of health.

This framework reveals that standardised regulatory models, derived from formal employment contexts, are fundamentally ill-suited to the fluid and heterogeneous nature of informal work in Egypt, where fear of official detection and economic precarity actively undermine compliance. The most pressing practical implication for Egypt, therefore, is the urgent need to develop OSH mechanisms that are decoupled from traditional employment contracts and that acknowledge the sector's structural constraints. Evidence suggests that collaborative, community-based interventions, developed in partnership with informal worker collectives and non-governmental organisations, hold more promise than top-down enforcement.

Such an approach might involve co-designing context-specific safety protocols, facilitating access to affordable personal protective equipment through existing social networks, and leveraging microfinance or trade associations as channels for OSH literacy campaigns, thereby building trust and agency from the ground up. A critical next step for research and policy is to rigorously document and evaluate the outcomes of these nascent, participatory OSH initiatives within the Egyptian context. Future work should employ longitudinal, action-oriented methodologies to assess not only reductions in injury rates but also shifts in power dynamics, economic resilience, and the capacity for collective bargaining among informal workers.

Ultimately, advancing occupational safety and health in Africa's informal economies demands a paradigm shift from seeing the sector as a problem to be regulated into formality, towards recognising it as a resilient arena wherein justice and protection must be innovatively reimaged.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by providing a historically grounded sociological analysis of occupational safety and health (OSH) within Egypt's vast informal economy. It moves beyond a purely regulatory or public health lens to theorise how informal work arrangements and embedded social relations systematically produce risk.

The research offers a novel conceptual framework linking historical labour market transformations to contemporary OSH vulnerabilities. The resulting empirical evidence and policy recommendations, developed between 2021 and 2026, are crucial for designing context-sensitive interventions that address the root socio-economic causes of workplace harm in this critical sector.

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