A Review On Social And Economic Problems Faced By Informal Women Workers In Pakistan During Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Globally, the effects of corona virus pandemic seem quite uncertain, the states are working hard to overcome of its impact on the economy. Although, the production, distribution and lifestyle are affected because of outbreak. This virus not only take more than 5 million lives, but it also paralyzed the global economy. Developing countries like Pakistan are widely expected to face severe economic setbacks in these circumstances. Women around the 200 countries have suffered many negative impacts because of nationwide lockdowns, quarantine measures and restrictions on mobility. The informal economy, which is dominated by women, has suffered unprecedented losses. Some scholars also believe that the pandemic will transform into an increase in the burden of unpaid domestic-work, economic autonomy absence, and discontinuation of maternity care services. Regardless of all these factors, there is a lack of a gender perspective in the policy response to this crisis. It is against this background that this article uses a feminist intersectionality perspective during the covid-19 crisis, to conduct contributing quantitative research on the challenges of informal women worker in Karachi. The present study reveals specific ways in which that exist socio-economic disparities grounded in status and work-related entities amplify the vulnerability confronting women under such crises. This research is providing a contextual framework for understanding the gender impact of pandemic. It also underlines the determination of considering gender-specific restrictions during health crises in order to develop strong, efficient and fair policy actions.

KEYWORDS Poverty, Informal Women Workers, Lockdown, Violence, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Although it is estimated that globally more than 4 million deaths caused by Covid-19. As, this pandemic is related to human health that has so far affected two hundred and sixteen states of the world (Gabirro, 2021). In the result of this outbreak, the nationwide lockdown, and the measures of quarantine were applied due to in control of the virus spreading that has led to the series of negative impacts on society and economy. It includes increased the vulnerability of economics, closures of business, and raise health hazards for the most disadvantaged groups in
However, the corona virus pandemic has turned into the crisis of humanitarian, causing unemployment, increasing hunger and food security in the developing countries such as Pakistan.

The immigration crisis of Pakistan has attracted global attention, as the nationwide lockdown has deprived them of their income in large cities, and thousands of daily wagers have begun to walk hundreds of kilometres back to their hometowns. In addition to the “health risks posed by the pandemic, Pakistan’s strict lockdown measures implemented between 29th February to 16th May 2020,” which have aggravated existing socio-economic disparities in the society (Pakistan, 2020). According to the "strictness" index established by the University of Oxford, the Pakistan lockdown listed during that period was 58 indexes, with a minimum of 25 index in February 2020, and a maximum of 94 index in April 2020 (PES, 2021).

In spite of severe lockdown measures, the contamination pace of corona virus has not straightened the nation over and continue to rise in cases. As well as the slowdown of finance caused by this crisis has severely affected the most vulnerable groups of Pakistani society. According to Pakistan Economic Monitoring Center, during this period, more than ninety-one million of small traders and temporary workers lose their jobs (PES, 2021), and another two hundred and sixty million people fell into poverty due to the economic catastrophe (Alkire, 2020). Trends around the globe also indicate that the influence of corona outbreak is highly gendered, and disproportionately affecting women.

However, the most unemployment occurs in the informal sector of Pakistan, which employs 54.7% of women in Pakistan (PLS, 2020). Due to the lack of proper security networks and social protections in the informal sector, there is a concern that the epidemic can lead to an increase in the “feminization of poverty” among women who are already living on the fringes of the economy (Wenham et al., 2020). The present pandemic experience in other low- and middle-income countries also shows that during such health crises. Specifically, women are affected by their focus on jobs that are vulnerable to disease, increased family-level care needs, and increased risk of domestic violence (UNFPA, 2020; Harman, 2016). Although these factors, in reaction to the covid-19 crisis few attempts have been made to develop gender policies.

Moreover, Pakistan’s initial retort to the pandemic catastrophe focused on empty performance actions, like a candlelight vigil, “to challenge the darkness induced by the virus.” The underlying structural factors of these health crises have been retreated behind the scenes. However, these structural factors are still critical in order for deploying a strong policy response of the covid-19 crisis. According to Mileti (1999) in her seminal work proved that after a crisis is a manifestation of existing social relations and is determined by different socio-economic considerations increasing in vulnerability. In this dynamic, gender relations may be particularly important (Wenham et al., 2020; Salleh 2012). This is on the grounds that gender relations in society are intertwined with different types of detriments established in class, position, and financial status, and cause various types of underestimations.
On the other hand, the present study is contributing on this critical area through exploratory field research during the pandemic to increased gender vulnerabilities. For this purpose, researcher use a gender perspective to analyse the experience of informal women worker in Karachi, Pakistan. Intersectionality analysis is based on the empirical investigation and this framework allows us to incorporate the "matrix of domination" (Collins, 1990) into our theoretical framework. It is represented by forgoing the power structure in society, similarly caste, class, and socio-economic divisions. However, “this context allows us to clarify the intersectional nature of the crisis and express the voices of women behind the scenes in most policy discussions about the pandemic”.

According to the Kabeer et al. (2021) that it has been a pivotal gap in pandemic related research, “A big research gap pertains to the intersectional dimensions of the crisis, particularly the losses to livelihoods and health by gender, race, class, disability, life course, and other markers of disadvantage.” It is necessary to do more research around the globe specifically in this area. As, we analyse the intersecting vulnerability experience of women workers who were belonged with informal economy in the crisis of COVID-19, firstly researcher reviewed gender and multidimensional poverty related issues in Pakistan. And then we continue to introduce our methodology and key findings. In last, we examined our outcomes to illustrate the theoretical and practical contributions of the research in detail, as well as conclude it with the approaches and way forward for the upcoming studies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Traditionally, poverty has been defined as income deprivation. And it is occurred in the absence of material resources of well-being, however, some scholars believes the understanding of poverty is more complicated as compare to the deficit of income, and it also has a series of social, economic, and material deficiencies (Chant, 2014). Capability approach is provided by Sen, which provide the framework of poverty dimensions from the approach of “income” to the “functioning and capability” approach. And this approach is encouraging a multidimensional evaluation of destitution through individual wellbeing, fundamental human functions, and freedom to exert a individual initiative (Sen, 1992). In this context, inequality between men and women is regarded as an "unfreedom" issue. It rooted in the structure and process of multiple discrimination on the basis of gender in society. In poverty assessment; despite, these theoretical advances, the current multidimensional poverty index cannot fully integrate the gender dimension of poverty (Chant, 2014; Deshpande, 2020). And these approaches confront the family as an analysis unit, instead of individual.

In one hand, a large number of research have shown that in the household there are various gender disparities like discernible in the unequal burden of unpaid care work undertaken by women, and disproportionate access to education, routine health care services and balanced diet. (Chager, 2010; Chakraborty 2020; Sen, 1992). On the other hand, these multidimensional indicators in the literature was not addressing the hyperbolic poverty effects on women breadwinner, which is called the “feminization of poverty” (Besell, 2015). However, an empirical case study conducted by (Kabeer, 2015) stated that women in “female-headed households not only experience income-based deprivation, but they also suffer from a series of
negative social stereotypes which is exacerbate financial stress on them and their vulnerability to harassment, expulsion, sexual manipulation, and violence”.

The paradigm of Pakistan’s current policy doesn’t recognize that how these multiple dimensions of poverty as well as how the whole different strataums of social life in Pakistan like gender, caste, and class relations pervade. While the current poverty alleviation programs generally focus on income-based poverty by in kind of money distributions as well as financial aid programs. Whereas policymakers tend to concentrate only about the aspect of income in poverty, instead of the social inequality forms of intersecting in Pakistan, which causing individuals in two or more vulnerable groups falling into the gap of allocating resources. Such people, particularly women are continuing to suffer from discrimination or poverty due to deeprooted and intricate societal norms and relation of power.

The theory put forward by Chager (2010) believes that the Pakistani state is playing the role of a "soft state", and power relations are hierarchically diversified. Therefore, it strengthened the patriarchal norm in Pakistani society and proved to be a major obstacle to the empowerment of women. Therefore, in the absence of strong public policy interventions the organizations of civil society are increasingly involved in the concentration of specific material and social challenges for women who were belongs to susceptible groups by providing credit, generating self-employment opportunities, and promoting legal literacy (Kabeer et al., 2013, Chakraborty, 2020).

Hence prove that the aspects of multi-dimensional poverty on Pakistani women twig from poverty income, in house patriarchal relations, and the lack of appropriate policy measures to address the interrelationships among the different kinds of susceptibilities confronting women. Furthermore, researchers will analyse these on-hand vulnerabilities in the follow-up part of the study. And it is rooted in Pakistan’s economy, which also delved by the socio-economic pressures caused by pandemic to the usage of intersectional framework. So, this background permits that to the implementation of the “additive” approach through the quantitative index of multi-dimensional poverty and to clarify the comprehensive impact of socio-economic difficulties and household differences about women's life experiences during the Covid-19 epidemic.

A GENDERED ANALYSIS ON INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT IN PAKISTAN

Second essential part of Pakistani women’s deprivation twigs by their informal sector employment and professional entities. As, international organization estimated that Pakistan has the world's largest informal, unregistered economy, and the share of informal employment in total employment is estimated to be 80.09 per cent (International Labour Organization, 2018). However, “the national labour legislation, income tax regulations, and social protection rights; like, sick leave, minimum wage, workplace health and safety regulations, and maternity leave benefits are not subjected to the employees of informal sectors” (Haokip, T. 2021).

According to the Arora, S., & Majumder, M. (2021), the informal employment as “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death”.
Therefore, the low wages, increasing inequality, livelihoods in secureness, and inadequate basic facilities are the stages of neoliberal phase on Pakistani economy. Meanwhile, the liberalization of farming markets, public utilities privatization, and downplay of prevailing labour legislation is resulting of the recession of neoliberal reforms during the pandemic (Kabeer et al., 2021).

However, the appraisal of gender is essential to understanding of Pakistan informal sectors, because currently there are too many women belongs with this sector. Thus, the existing gender inequality and informal conditions in society are intertwined, creating different ways of marginalized women to engaged in this sector. In the contras, the patriarchal norm in Pakistani society means that women’s skills and training levels are low, there are few opportunities to obtain start-up funds, and they cannot obtain employment opportunities in the formal sector. In informal employment these differences are clearly reflected in the unequal wages. While, in rural areas of Pakistan, women’s income is estimated to be 54% of men’s income and the ratio is 70% in urban areas (Pakistan Labour Force Survey, 2018-2019). In certain industries like the garments industry, in those wage gaps continue due to the division of labour as a male or a female.

Although, informal employment is distinguished with a well-designed subcontracting system in which the relationship of employer-employee traditionally and the contracts of standard work do not exist (Deshpande, et al., 2020). Through this system middlemen and subcontractors are transforming greater insecurity and exploitation. So, the deficiencies of the traditional trade unions that are usually dominated by men, women's power in informal employment has been exaggerated.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF THE CORONA OUTBREAK

The crisis of COVID-19 was originally heralded as a "great leveler". And it pushed societies into a situation of turbulence, quarantine, and insecurity. Though, people ultimately realized that a global pandemic acted like “portal” that has generated different ways of insecurity, instability and change the connection between individuals and their communities (Roy, 2020). This underlines the systemic flaws and vulnerabilities of societies, and it also creating the distinct kinds of problems to marginalization in the society (Haokip, 2021).

However, the policy planning related to the covid-19 crisis ignores the pre-existing vulnerabilities of differently able persons. In Pakistan, when the corona virus has been recognized as a "national disaster", disabled people expelled endeavours from the centre and nation. It is analysed in the recent study that “how differently able people face multiple forms of disadvantages related to the accessibility of physical space, personal care, and medical services during the lockdown period” (Ghai, 2021). As an example, people in wheelchairs need to touch its wheels to move the wheelchair, and visually impaired people can only help to guide themselves in order to ensure their mobility through feeling or touching the surrounding environment for this reason they are more vulnerable to the virus. Furthermore, the social distancing norms were strictly implemented during the lockdown. So, the economic impact of the crisis is largely affected on society by status and gender differentiation.
Moreover, one another study indicated that after the lockdown period, the unemployment probability of informal women worker was three time higher than formal sector women workers. Study from India provides an in-depth analysis of the experiences of tribal communities during the pandemic through case studies (Wenham et al., 2020). It is showed that subsequent economic crisis during the lockdown, the tribal communities were “systematically exploited stigmatized and even eliminated, being at the bottom of the biopolitical hierarchy.” And this vulnerability caused by the crisis also has a clear gender dimension. However, some other studies have been shown that how women face high rates of domestic violence which increased burden of unpaid domestic work in the months after the crisis (Islam, 2020). It is also proof that the catastrophe has also been a disproportionately on employment for women and income.

Punjab Domestic and Homebased workers survey (2020-2021) indicated that approximately there are twelve million home-based workers are working in Pakistan, and their monthly income is about 3,000 to 4,000 rupees. These people were belonging to the informal sector, they also face various problems, like income insecurity and the lack of social protection. Under the current circumstances, this part of the labour force faces the risk of losing their livelihoods because they cannot provide the required working hours. Thus, it is clear that in Pakistani society how the different forms of vulnerability faced by diverse groups are constrained through the social and economic differences. Researchers are contributing towards developing literature in this subject by studying the inter-sectional hindrances faced by women informal workers in Pakistan, basis on their occupation, class status as a male or a female and correspond the economic pressures because the crisis of covid-19.

METHODOLOGY

Although research things with little relevant information may sound a little difficult. There are several ways to help researchers find the best research design, method of data collection, and topic selection. Primary and secondary data are the two ways to conduct research. With the help of these two types a researcher can use a multiple method and based on this way of data collection research can be qualitative or quantitative.

As the nature of research was exploratory, we follow hypothesis that elaborates the selection of research method must be based on the objective of research and the topic people want to understand, because of this researcher chose the quantitative research (Bryman et al., 2003). Quantitative methods provide a reasonable framework for analysing the empirical experience of the COVID-19 pandemic of informal women workers in Karachi. For this purpose, nonprobability sampling techniques of snowball and purposive were used for collection of data.

In this study for the collection of data researcher used a structured questionnaire as a tool. And simple frequency methods were using for analysis of data collection. To know about experiences of informal women workers all through the epidemic. For this, a sample of 50 informal women workers were selected from the different areas of Karachi city between the period of February to March 2021. Face to face interviews were conducted by researchers which allowed them to establish personal relationships with informal women workers.
KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table No. 1 Informal women workers face restriction on their mobility during pandemic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restriction on mobility</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>42.00</td>
<td>84.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>08.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The following table is about the informal women workers face restriction on their mobility during Covid-19. It shows that 84.00% of respondent’s mobility were restricted while 16.00% were not face any kind of restriction on their mobility. Research indicates that in Pakistan, all forms of public transportation were completely closed during the period of lockdown. As, public transportation is a dominant pivot for the participation of women in the economy. In absence of transportation not only economic stress were increased among women but it also put their health and wellbeing at risk. This flawed thinking policy has exacerbated current class prejudice in the social mobility and access to essential medical services.

Table No. 2 Challenges face by informal women workers during pandemic situation at household level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges at household level</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>increase in inflation</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>24.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unemployment</td>
<td>38.00</td>
<td>76.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the above table it refers to challenges face by informal women workers at household level during pandemic situation. Outcomes of the study shows that during the lockdown, 76.00% of respondents experiences severe unemployment and economic crisis. Whereas 24.00% of respondents face challenges because of high petroleum prices that is leading inflation over the state. As, majority of the respondents were illiterate, or their education status is very low. In addition to the work, they did before the lockdown, they also don’t have any alternative skills. As a result, these informal women workers face terrible economic crisis during this period. So, the economic activities were totally closed without any kind of social security.

Table No. 3 Dissemination of respondent according to food scarcity during the lockdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Scarcity</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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http://www.webology.org
During the pandemic the employment and economic loses become another major impact of increased in food insecurity among poor and marginalized households. 88.00% of the women who were selected for interview stated that they did not have the money to buy food during this period. While 12.00% were not facing challenge regarding food scarcity during lockdown. However, during the lockdown period, these marginalized families lacked effective food supplies and rations. Because of pandemic the economic downfall happens, and it is intertwined with the lack of efficient regulating system during the quarantine period, and the food vulnerability of these poor women may also increase.

Table No. 4 Division of respondent according to they have ability to plan their families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to plan their families</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>40.00</td>
<td>80.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 demonstrates that 80% of respondents never planned family size whereas 20% were very sure about their increase in their family size and managing their family expenses. The higher percentage indicates that normally people do not plan their life and future of their children that is why they face financial and social issues in later life which becomes barrier in providing better future to their family. Unwanted pregnancies especially during in the last two years of lockdown and covid 19 the increase in population trend has clearly demonstrated the unplanned psyche of people overall. However, the adverse impact of these unwanted pregnancies directly hit the health and nutritional well-being of informal women workers who already have multiple children.

**CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD**

This article focuses on the gender perspective of intersectional components of the covid-19 crisis. And puts forward the voice of women who were engaged in informal economy in Karachi. Researchers analysed the Pakistan’s containment measures and strict lockdown mechanisms to rheostat the outbreaks of virus in Pakistan, which imperilled prevailing susceptibilities, exacerbated ongoing economic inequality, and widened the social and economic differences of socially marginalized groups in the future.

Above all discussions on the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on informal women labour force have been based on the primary data. However, the analysis of macro-economic indicators,
such as decreases in the ratio of GDP, drop ration of employment, declining in the level of total revenue, or declining confidence among consumers. This article highlights these voices through field interviews with 50 women who were engaged with informal economy. Although the related crisis of Covid-19 has multiple impacts on the lives of such women, so researcher divided them into four different categories.

Although, such categories embody a unique approach and illustrates that how the pandemic has aggravated their daily lives at home and at work on gender-based experiences. Meanwhile, the empirical investigation takes the lens as the frame, allowing researcher to discover the different forms of intersection vulnerability that women have accumulated in their daily lives during the pandemic. Outcome of the study revealed that how multiple, intersecting characteristics of discrimination interact to create a complex “matrix of domination”. And that is rooted not only in gender, but also in the profession of the participants.

The study also claims to have made a modest contribution to the theoretical literature on multidimensional poverty. On the contrary, researcher has studied multi-axis of abject poverty in terms of individual women in the family. It is also revealing complex interactions among deprivation on the household level and the different forms of marginalization experienced by women during the Covid-19 crisis. At the practical level, this empirical analysis shows that the further kind of poverty effectively rooted from the lack of a gender policy response to the economic crisis.

Result of the study has been indicated that even the inadequate forms of income subsidies and food succour which are available for these women were not targeted. During the lockdown, in the absence of any social security and insurance, such targeted programs aggravated their financial insecurity. These policy privileges do not even consider other aspects of women’s poverty, including gender dependency on public transportation. And these indifference puts an additional burden on women by increasing job uncertainty, loss in income, decreases of resources, and reducing ability to access maternal and routine health care services. So, in such a short-sightedness in the implementation of policy may reverse Pakistan’s limited advances in empowering women. As the COVID-19 epidemic continues to destroy Pakistan. It is critical to develop well-targeted income support measures for women workers in vulnerable forms of employment, as well as to consider their distinct social and financial demands during the planning process.

REFERENCES


