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**SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19  
ON MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN PAKISTAN**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Since the eruption of COVID-19, the virus has been taking human lives and inflicting economies worldwide. The economic crisis has intensified global unemployment as the UN and the ILO reports are showing serious concerns. The financial experts estimated that the global economy was already depressing in the year 2018-19 with 1.9 percent; the lowest growth rate in a decade. The virus had further shattered it to -3.3 percent. Its impact in Pakistan is significantly harmful and economic growth was -1.3 percent in 2020. The weak healthcare system has further damaged the fragile economy. All spheres of life have been severely affected by the virus, but the low-income groups are more vulnerable. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, Pakistan was facing economic instability and the virus has intensified the situation, raising questions about the survival from the challenges, being faced by the low-income groups and how they have to cope with them. The objective of the study is to examine the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on marginalized groups of Pakistan as the pandemic has deprived them of their livelihood. The study has applied the qualitative approach with analytical method. Looking at the empirical data, it seems that enslavement by the employees to vulnerable groups has been strengthened because of virus. The study concluded that the virus caused huge economic loss to low-income groups.*

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**Keywords:** Economic crisis, Lockdown, Pandemic, Jobless, Low-income

**INTRODUCTION**

The outbreak of COVID-19 occurred in Wuhan City of China at the end of December 2019 spreading rapidly and wrapping rest of the world. About 209 countries became its victim. At the end of July 2022, the number of confirmed cases was 572 239 451 with 6 390 401 deaths (WHO, 2022). Moreover, the number of infected persons is still rising in the world. The virus has become a threat to the global community and was declared as the sixth Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30, 2020. It was called a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The WHO declared it a big global risk, rising rapidly at a high rate. In the first quarter of 2020, the death ratio was about six percent (WHO, 2020). At that time, the virus had taken over 2,700 lives and the number of infected persons was more than 80,000 in 34 countries worldwide. The highest number of cases was in China as the WHO reported (Ali, 2020).

Viewing the severity of the pandemic, social distancing was crucial which led to the option of lockdown worldwide. This threatening situation not only increased the burden on healthcare but

also affected the economy. Pakistan with its shattered economy was the worst hit and its massive number of workers became jobless after the closure of industry and other sectors. This situation led to economic instability, raising questions about the livelihood of marginalized groups. The study has raised the questions; what were those challenges, which were being faced by the low-income groups? How these groups have to cope with this worst economic situation?

#### COVID-19 IN PAKISTAN

In Pakistan, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed by the Ministry of Health on February 26, 2020, in Karachi (Sindh). He was a returnee student from Iran after pilgrimage/Zyaraat. On the same day, the ministry confirmed another case in Islamabad that belonged to Skardu (Gilgit Baltistan), with a travel history in Iran. Every year, about 0.7 million Pakistanis move for a pilgrimage to Iran and visit the holy places and shrines and these visits are normally in the spring season (Akram & Adnan, 2020). In the coming two weeks, the number of total confirmed cases of COVID-19 was 20 out of 421 suspected cases and the highest number was in Sindh, followed by Gilgit Baltistan (COVID-19 live dashboard Pakistan, 2020). Pakistan is at fifth position among the highest-populous nations and third in positive cases in South Asia (BBC News, 2021).

The early sources of transmission were the people returning from Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UK, Italy, Spain, etc. The second major source for the spread of the epidemic was the religious congregation of Raiwind (Pakistan), which led the one lac believers, including 3,000 foreigners to assemble there. Later this congregation was canceled, but a few hundred stayed there and were not detained for testing or placed in isolation before leaving for their homes. These persons hailing from different areas became source of spreading virus unintentionally. A follower of *Tableeghi Jamaat* (preaching group) blamed the Punjab government for not providing clear instructions in time (The Express Tribune, 23 April 2020). The religious congregations also became a source of spreading COVID-19 in Malaysia and India as well (Quadri, 2020). However, no single case was brought from China to Pakistan as extra precautionary measures were taken by the two countries for the exit/entry of infected persons (NIH, 2020). Another reason was the refusal of the government in February to repatriate hundreds of Pakistani students in Wuhan, out of fear of spreading the virus.

From Iran, the first batch of 252 pilgrims arrived in Taftan in February 2020. They were kept at Taftan, a smaller city of Baluchistan near the Iranian border. Pakistan was not willing to accommodate these persons without arrangements for 14-day quarantine. The government ordered for providing a quarantine center with monitoring facilities for the pilgrims, but they were allowed to leave Taftan without quarantine. They also violated the government's instruction and tried to flee from the quarantine centers. These places were over crowded with unhygienic conditions and insufficient water, food, medicine and other healthcare facilities, which further worsened the situation. The statistics indicate that nearly 6000 pilgrims returned

from Iran and were kept in Taftan. One-fourth of them were infected (Durrani, 2020).

Non-availability of any suitable vaccine led the governments to adopt the option of lockdown to curb the spread of the virus, but initial missteps overshadowed this act in many countries. On March 23, Sindh became the first province, where lockdown was implemented. Prime Minister Imran Khan (who himself had the federal health ministry) initially ruled out a countrywide lockdown, explaining its adverse effects on the low-income working class (Afzal, 2020). However, after a few hours, the federal government reversed its decision and imposed a nationwide shutdown. The military supervised and monitored the lockdown, deploying the troops countrywide and assisting the civilian administrations in enforcing the lockdown. This nationwide shutdown was subsequently extended till May 31, but a few relaxations were given after April 14, 2020. Several industries, including construction, were opened for work, but the Sindh government continued its sterner measures (Afzal, 2020). In the early days of the crisis, on March 17, PM delivered the message to remain at peace as “there is no reason to worry since 90 percent of the infected would have mild flu-type symptoms and 97 percent would recover fully” (Hussain, 2020). The number of cases subsequently increased, placing Pakistan among the top 12 virus-infected countries worldwide (ICG, 2020).

The government justified its relaxation on economic grounds as the lockdown was to affect the most vulnerable sections of population, particularly farmers, workers and labourers. The relaxation measures of mid-April also included reopening of mosques, which were previously barred from holding prayers. Only five persons were allowed for prayers. However, there was mixed response, in a few areas, clerics violated the orders and the police had to detain the offenders temporarily, which provoked violence against the police (Hashim, 2020). In Sindh, mosques were restricted, while in Islamabad, police registered cases without any arrest, avoiding any unpleasant situation. The Arab governments also moved to closure of religious places to avoid public gatherings. The Islamic institutions like awqaf (endowments) and ministries of Islamic affairs were mobilized for controlling the spread of the virus. All these Islamic venues served as crucial windows into state-society relations, working to feed the poor in the Muslim world. Consequently, the pandemic reshaped the relationship. In the last two decades, the efforts of countering violent extremism including edicts, purges, arrests, legislation and other measures distorted the image of these institutions and their relationship with the regimes. In changing circumstances, these steps “may now reap dividends for some governments, and just as they instrumentalized the specter of terrorism, they may exploit this outbreak to exert greater control and surveillance over Islamic authorities” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020).

To ensure compliance with social distancing and other measures, many regimes are relying on clerics who have gained citizens’ trust for their religious learning and social roles. In tandem, Islamic charities connected to regimes are helping in easing the dire economic impact

of virus. The studies of past pandemics have shown that in such a situation, trust in the regime and its legitimacy becomes low as public is more likely to engage in “skeptical noncompliance.” Conversely, Islamic venues of communication become more helpful in convincing the public about importance of regime’s efforts for ultimate end of the pandemic, either the state do it on its own resources or get external support. In remote and hard-to-reach locations of Bangladesh and Pakistan, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) delivered the message of public health to Imams of mosques and directed them for hygienic environment to keep the virus away. They were insisted to deliver this message through mosques in Friday sermons.

Despite the preventive measures of the government, the pandemic was not controlled and the number of new cases remained high in Pakistan until mid-June 2020 ([www.COVID.gov.pk.com](http://www.COVID.gov.pk.com)). In November, the second wave erupted with an increase in virus-positive cases and deaths. In January 2021, the government allowed the opening of educational institutions gradually, implementing the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) strictly along with mandatory use of face masks. The ban on public events was also relaxed, but with social distancing, and varying levels of smart lockdown.

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study is aimed to view the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on marginalized people of Pakistan as the pandemic has deprived them of their livelihood. It has applied the qualitative approach with analytical method. According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), “qualitative methodology enables the researcher to examine social behaviour in a realistic context, to exhibit an active role in research and attention to participants’ actions and words.” As the objective of the study is to examine impact of virus on low-income groups, the qualitative method is appropriate. The discussion is based on the qualitative analysis of all the available primary and secondary sources, including books, journal articles, newspapers and official reports. The study also collected information from electronic and social media networks. For further information, personal contacts were made with available persons, which help in careful mapping out of the situation and circumstances.

#### **IMPACT OF VIRUS ON ECONOMY**

The increased healthcare burden and the financial imbalance are worldwide phenomena. The effects of global virus were not limited to health, but the economy was the worst-affected sector. Global economic growth experienced the worst impact in the past one hundred years. It was estimated that the virus could trim the economic growth by three to six percent within a year. The markets in the US, Europe, China and the Middle East showed an economic decline due to virus (Ahmed, 2020). About 12.50 million people became victims to food security. The pandemic pushed half of the population below the poverty line, while it was one-third previously (Sun & Wah, 2020). The loss of global economies was \$90 trillion (Wang, et.al., 2020).

Expensive medicines further increased the miseries of the poor as they were out of their access.

The GDP (gross domestic product) rate in Pakistan was 6.2 percent in 2018 and 2.5 percent in 2019, while COVID-19 lowered it to -1.3 percent in FY 2020, the lowest in Pakistan's history from 1961 to 2021 (WB, 2022). This negative trend in GDP led to financial crisis and recession. On the other hand, quality of social life became a dream due to social alienation, self-segregation, travel ban, etc. Social restrictions led to unemployment and a decline in all economic sectors. All industries had to maintain blockade, which slowed their growth. Revenue dropped to one-third and exports came down to half of the previous level, affecting the economy negatively (Ahmad, 2020). In June 2021, Pakistan's GDP bounced back to six percent (WB, 2022).

#### **UPS AND DOWNS IN REMITTANCES**

Another negative impact was on remittances, a vital source of foreign exchange. Overseas Pakistani working in the Middle East, the Gulf and other Arab countries, sends these. In changing situations, a higher number of migrant workers were at risk of losing jobs or pushed back to their countries of origin as they were temporarily residing there. However, after a few earlier months of pandemic, this amount increased as the State Bank reported that in 2020, official remittance rose to \$ 23.13 billion, a 6.4 percent increase as compared to the previous year. This amount was brought through informal sources like hundi or such other sources. Pakistan was not affected the way the developed economies as the US faced 21.63 percent reduction in remittances as compared to 2019 (Ahmed, 2020).

#### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19**

Globally, the pandemic threatened the livelihoods of all types of workers. It increased the economic fallout and considerably damaged the economic recovery process. Pakistan with its shattered economy was the worst-hit. A huge number of industrial workers become jobless after closure of factories and retail stores as the number of orders was reduced. Apart from it, the industrial sector encountered the shortage of raw material, which delayed manufacturing process of commodities, increasing the prices. Both price hike and pandemic affected the workers (Wang, et.al., 2020). There was also shortage of raw materials from foreign countries. Pakistani manufacturers mostly import raw materials from China, India, and other such countries. The restriction on transportation and business activities disrupted the supply chain in these countries. Even pandemic affected the huge Chinese economy and its GDP shrunk 10 to 20 percent in January-February 2020 in comparison to previous year. Similar decline was visible in other countries. All this resulted in 12.3 million job-losses, enhancing number of jobless persons (Shafi, et.al., 2020).

#### **ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON UN-ORGANIZED WORKFORCE**

According to the PBS (2019), total workforce was 63.4 million (15-y old and above) in 2018, while the number of unemployed persons was 3.6 million (6%), out of which 26.41 million (41.6%)

were vulnerable as they were either self-employed, daily wagers or low-paid domestic workers (Wang, et.al., 2020). These workers were either from slum urban localities or rural areas. For earning their livelihood, they were residing in urban centers. They received short notice to quit their workplaces when the government announced a lockdown on March 23, 2020 (Dawn, March 24, 2020). All activities were halted immediately, making a huge number of factory workers and market labourers a surplus due to the lockdown. In Punjab, approximately 500,000 workers of textile and garment industry became jobless in March as Pakistan Workers' Federation reported (HRC, 2021). The majority of the workers hailed from the backward and remote areas of the country. They faced many difficulties in returning to their native places. Thousands of them were stuck at bus stops, taxi stands and railway stations without any transport. The police further halted their movement as no one was allowed to travel during the lockdown. In many instances, drivers of small vehicles traveled from Karachi to Peshawar on their mini-rickshas and taxis to go back to their native places (Personal Communication, June 15, 2020). Returning to homes was not secure as there was neither enough food nor work for these workers. The rural economy was already overloaded and unable to absorb such a large number. Apart from it, these workers had little time to secure food, cash, and other necessities as the pandemic halted economic activity and transport to a grinding point (WHO, 2020).

Domestic workers have equally bad feelings as their entry was banned in their workplaces. Domestic work does not fall in the category of regular or formally paid work and the employers give no payment settlement or job guarantee. This workforce is hired for part-time jobs and performs duty on daily basis. These workers remain at the mercy of the employers for job continuation. They returned back to their slums in evening after doing their duties. Due to the lockdown and fear for spread of virus, most of them had to stay inside homes without a job, unable to meet both ends needs. The entry of the hawkers or walking in the streets for selling goods was also restricted and in a few cases, even the police for violating the lockdown, when they tried to enter the streets (Personal Communication, August 12, 2020) pushed them out forcefully from the area.

This lockdown temporarily left about 10.5 million workers without jobs, including contract/casual workers and daily wagers (Ahmad, 2020). In the fiscal year 2020-21, this crisis led to 6.65 million workers without jobs, while in previous years, the number of jobless persons was 5.80 million. The developed countries were equally affected by COVID-19, rich countries like the USA faced job loss of 74.7 million after eruption of the pandemic, and the majority belonged to the industrial sector with low wages (HRW, 2021). There was also a fear of slipping below the poverty lines for half a billion people in developing countries owing to unemployment. This situation was equally distressing for employers and employees as the hike in virus was closing the business, markets and industries. The invested amount was at stake, raising concerns among the invested class about their investment. A report highlighted that lockdown damaged the

economy, reducing development in GDP, and letting to a negative growth rate (-0.05%) in 2020 (Wang, et.al., 2020).

#### **IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ON MIGRANT WORKERS**

The majority of the unemployed workers were daily wagers and an adequate proportion of migrant workers became part of this stream. A specific number of workers were not directly linked with their employers as they were hired through the middlemen, who brought them from their villages/towns, taking responsibility for their wages from owners to them. In many cases, retaining wages from employers was not easy and the theft on part of middlemen was extensively reported in many cities (Personal Communication, November 15, 2020). Labour associations rarely speak for such type of labour as these workers are commonly illiterate, having little knowledge of their legal rights.

The majority of poor families live in slum areas and this practice is seen in all South Asian countries. The migrant workers undertake both short and long terms movements to urban areas in search of jobs and better wages. Getting jobs in the cities is not easy as there is severe competition and low-skilled workers have to accept low wages with constant job insecurity. The virus further added to their miseries and situation became challenging for daily wage-earners. Many of them ran out of food because of lockdown. Majority of this category do not possess bank accounts, which further delayed access to government welfare schemes.

The risk of infection through the migrant workers was also high as were the cases in the Middle East and the Gulf region. A huge number of Pakistanis were working there. There were serious concerns found about those workers, who were residing in densely populated areas or poorly sanitized labour camps. These workers had insufficient health facilities and access to the local healthcare system was curtailed due to requirements of the system, which were mandatory to be fulfilled for getting a health facility.

#### **IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ON ORGANIZED LABOURERS**

Another group falling victim due to the lockdown was the peasants/farmers. The closure of hotels, restaurants, marriage halls, banquet halls, cafeterias, canteens and food streets reduced the demands of vegetables and grain, which triggered the problems for growers. About 70 percent of population depends upon agriculture, making farming the basic source of income. In a few instances, tons of kilograms of vegetables were wasted. Consequently, the farmers had to sell their crops on the cheaper rates during the lockdown period, while pay back of agriculture loan became difficult and expectations of normal season was also uncertain as no end-time of pandemic was in view (Personal communication, July 20, 2020). The employees of the hotel and tourism industry were also included in the list of the worst-affected group. During the pandemic, restrictions on traveling and hostelling affected regular employees worldwide. Another highly affected group in lockdown was workers in the entertainment industry.

Mostly they lost jobs and no alternative source of income was available during the lockdown.

According to a study by the UNU-CPR (2020), this type of workforce is part of modern slavery. They are already in exploited status, which is due to power imbalance between them and factory/farm owner/landlord. The pandemic put them at greater risk of exploitation and above it, inadequate healthcare, food and job security further increased their vulnerability. All over the world, about 40.3 million people are in modern slavery and COVID-19 is foiling efforts to end it, particularly sex workers, child labour, bonded labour and human trafficking, which have been committed to end under the UN SDG Target 8.7 by the countries (Cockayne & Smith, 2020).

#### **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN, CHILDREN AND FAMILY**

Women were equally victims of COVID-19 around the globe and suffered economically, socially and culturally. The world wide restricted movements left scores of women overwhelmed with debts, poverty and unemployment. Above it, their economic inadequacy and subservience position further increased their vulnerability, throwing them into the worst situation. Though the number of such women was low, yet a reasonable portion was at risk. The virus widened the deep-seated gender gap, which already ranked the country at the bottom side for gender equality. There was also fear of losing some of economic and social gains, which have been achieved by women after hard struggle (Quresh, 2020). The UNHCR confirmed that COVID-19 damaged the paid domestic workers, particularly girls and women that were mainly engaged in this task (HRC, 2021). The majority of women have informal jobs, which were the first to go in pandemics, leaving women without jobs and income, pushing in prevailing uncertainty. Apart from it, the closure of educational institutions and other workplaces deprived a large number of females from their jobs. They were hired for childcare in homes and institutions for working mothers. Furthermore, the closure of schools also increased the burden of childcare for mothers, further reducing their economic opportunities. Women are not only at disadvantaged positions in the labour market but also experience gender inequalities at home, where men did not share housework or childcare. This practice is common in Pakistan and witnessed especially in the families, having children below the age of 16 years.

The virus deprived over a quarter of women of their jobs in different sectors, either they were fired or suspended. A Karachi-based lady was the main earner of her family. She provided jobs to nine other women, each earning Rs.40,000 a month and paying school fees and other expenditures for her kids. The pandemic ended the demand of her products and this made her jobless along with her employees, finding it difficult to make both ends meet. She was not the only victim to COVID-19, thousands of other Pakistani business women faced drastic income losses (Quresh, 2020).

During the lockdown, domestic violence increased and a large number of women became victims to it. This practice was also seen in previous outbreaks of cholera, Zika virus and Ebola virus (Quresh,

2020). This situation increased the propensity of female exploitation in various ways. Stay-at-home orders controlled the spread of COVID-19 but did not provide safety to housewives. A lethal virus was outside the homes and abusers were inside homes. They exploited restrictions and exaggerated news about the virus to exert dominance and influence. The lockdown inadvertently permitted the abusers to exploit the domestic situations and close confinement, which provided liberty to them, amplifying the rate and frequency of violence. Women, who already have sore relations with their spouses, could not escape from spousal abuse. The abusers exploited the isolation and coerce women (Ali and Khalid, 2021). In several cases, victims could not contact for protection to crisis centers, friends and families outside or healthcare services (Personal Communication, May 15, 2021).

During the lockdown, working and non-working women in Pakistan were stuck in homes. Feelings of persecution, instilling fear and hopelessness were prevailing in the surroundings. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, during lockdown of March 2020, about 399 murder cases of women were reported, whereas police helpline received only 25 calls. This helpline cannot correlate with gender-based violence as the Ministry of Human Rights receives about 40,000 calls a month and 13 calls were made for gender violence in March 2020. An increasing trend of violence was also witnessed in Sindh as the police registered ten cases of *karo-kari* in March only (Agha, 2020). During this time, resources for domestic violence interventions were being used for COVID-19 and mostly social welfare helplines and crisis centers of the provincial level were not working due to reduction in funding. The same was the case of healthcare facilities, which were working for pandemic only (Malkani, 2020; Agha, 2020).

Most of the family planning facilities and healthcare services are still not fully functional across the country. The health workers are either grounded or reluctant to field work owing to insufficient protective measures. Field reports highlighted the distress of pregnant women and problems of other women for health and family planning in pandemic period.

It was reported with reference to official statistics that during the lockdown, a 25 percent increase was observed in cases of domestic violence in eastern Punjab (Ali and Khalid, 2021). In the year 2020, about 2,297 cases of gender violence were reported in 25 districts. In July, at the peak time of virus, the highest number of cases was reported for gender violence and again this situation was observed in September with the resurgence of COVID-19 (Shaikh, 2021).

The environment also led to illegal sources of income as Felbab-Brown (2020) identified that COVID-19 has substantially contributed to growth of illegal economies and crimes worldwide. These underlying crimes include women trafficking. A noteworthy rise was seen in online prostitution during the pandemic, enslaving many women through practices of corrosion, trapping and exploitation, while human traffickers were ahead of all these negative activities. The statistics of human trafficking are not available; however, there are reported events of this heinous crime during the pandemic with the number of sexual abuse cases in Pakistan. In 2020, more than 11,000

Pakistanis were detained abroad and many were arrested due to fraudulent documents, provided by their employers, who confiscated their original papers for forced labor. Many Pakistani girls were in sex trafficking in Kenya, while disabled persons were forced to begin the UAE by traffickers. Even in Pakistan, several organized criminal groups forced adults and children into bonded labour in construction industry (US State Department, 2020).

A study by Pateman (2018) explained that male domination is part of cultural and social settings in many societies and ‘sex contract’ is taken as the subordination of women, paving the path to growth of patriarchy. Such practices include, preventing girls’ education, forced and unwanted marriages and births, confining in homes, preventing from earning, etc. The feminist academics’ showed concerns for these practices as women were sexually abused and exploited by the pimps, traffickers, and buyers of sex on daily bases.

Sohrabiet et.al., (2020) predicted that “the tendency of girls and women being trafficked for sex will increase as a result of the global plague.” Explained reasons for females’ victimization is their marginalized position, involving them in hazardous labour to make both ends need. Another perspective is of Sarkar (2020), which identified that the closure of transnational borders has led traffickers to move to online sex trafficking. This tendency has made the trafficking of females as the most fast-growing crime, resulting from the global pandemic. This implies that internet sources and communication technology have facilitated the operations of felonious elements of society, providing them with illegal opportunities for sex trafficking in times of COVID-19. Technological resources like advertisement sites, chatrooms, social media and the dark web have paved the way for the interconnectivity of traffickers and no country is free from this impact. It has also increased the number of female victims, being targets of sex traffickers, who exploited them in the name of earning, as the absence of work is the main factor for pushing them in this direction.

The virus also halted the traditional employers of child labour like food streets, restaurants, hotels, food stalls, roadside repair shops, etc. in Pakistan, which led increase in child trafficking for domestic enslavement, sex work, and internet pornography. Save the Children reported that COVID-19 changed the pattern of sexual exploitation that was not operating in streets, but indoors or online. Children constitute one-fourth of all victims of trafficking or exploitation and they had to suffer more in pandemic (Relief Web, 2020). Internet and other encrypted digital communication apps were misused during lockdown as people used to spend lot of time there, which led to the sharp increase in trafficking of children and young women in South Asian countries. The economic experts showed fear of fueling up the cyber-bullying, cybersex trafficking and human trafficking due to massive economic crisis as a result of pandemic. Dr. Lakesh Khatri, a psychologist in Sindh commented, “Children with low self-esteem can easily be manipulated by predators through the Internet.” Social distancing and isolation led the people to seek online entertainment (Amar, 2020). Despite this, Pakistani women have remained at the forefront of all efforts to fight the pandemic. At the global level, 70

women are engaged in healthcare while a large number of women employees are working in the country's health sector (ILO, 2021). Women and their work as caregivers within households have become of immense importance due to the current arrangement of work-from-home and home-school children.

#### **INCREASING RISK OF ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY**

There are several reasons to fear economic recovery, improvement in economic conditions as uncertainty about the continuation and spread of pandemic is still there, and no deadline is in view. Pakistan is facing grave employment crisis due to massive backlogs, which already exist in public and private sectors recruitments. The ratio of unemployment was 6.6 percent in 2020, and currently is 6.2 percent (IMF, 2022). In specific professions, the restricted movement and social distancing further increased unemployment in parlors, beauty salons, barber shops, restaurants, hotels, etc. Even many private institutions reduced the number of employees, which increased the miseries of unemployed persons. Shams-ur-Rehman Swati, president of the National Labor Federation (NLF) commented the situation, "It's happening in all over Pakistan nowadays. Laborers, especially daily wagers, and contract employees are being laid off without any notice and hundreds of laborers are being laid off across the country since the government imposed the lockdown last month" (Latif, 2020). Many vacancies were abolished due to work from home, which reduced need of assistant staff. Jobs in the formal private sector were also dried up. According to PIDE (2020), about 20 to 70 million people would be forced to live below the poverty line due to pandemic. In the year 2015-16, this was estimated at 24.3 percent (Ahmad, 2020).

Apart from millions of jobless persons, the issue of low wages also troubled a huge number of workers. For example, in Thailand, a surge in demand of medical supplies led the manufacturers to hire cheap labour, targeting vulnerable migrant workers (Oxford Policy Management & UN, 2020). Though there are other positive examples as Australia provided extension in visas of seasonal workers and Pakistani workers were equal beneficiaries. However, the pandemic has amplified a few major drivers of modern slavery like financial crisis and poverty. In order to meet demand for hand sanitizer and masks, advanced countries like the US have turned to prison labour, engaging them in drug industry (Cockayne and Smith, 2020). In pandemic, norms of forced labour are being violated and Pakistan is no exception. The UN Human Rights special rapporteur warned that "Historical levels of underemployment or unemployment, loss of livelihoods and uncertain economic perspectives are some of the complex consequences of COVID-19, which have hit the most vulnerable hardest." In his report, he argued that the virus was pushing millions of men, women and children into modern slavery and different forms of exploitation (UNHR, 2020). The ILO (2020) also reported that COVID-19 has led to an economic as well as labour crisis, at the lower level of 5.3 million, and the highest trend was 24.7 million. It was 188 million in 2019. Currently, increasing

unemployment is worldwide. In Pakistan, the closure of non-essential businesses has left millions of people unemployed.

#### **MEASUREMENTS FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

The low-income segments of Pakistani society require financial support to improve their quality of life. The government announced relief packages of Rs.1.2 trillion to support the businesses, damaged during COVID-19. Out of this amount, Rs150 billion was fixed for low-income groups, particularly labourers, whereas Rs.280 billion (\$1.76 billion) was allotted for grain procurement. For exporters, loan interest payments were postponed momentarily, and a package of one hundred billion rupees (\$63 million) was assigned for small industries and the agriculture sector. There was also a significant reduction in petroleum prices and bills of electricity of a certain amount were to be paid in installments. Despite these well-intended measures, disappointment was still there. The differences between the federal government and the provinces created hurdles in policy-making to cope with the virus (Sarwana, et.al., n.d.).

The Asian Development Bank granted a loan of \$ 300 million to improve the public health sector in Pakistan to counter the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. It facilitated for basic requirements of the needy and vulnerable groups. The bank initiated the CARES program to assist the government for the provision of social security programs to the poor and low-paid groups, expanding healthcare facilities. The bank also facilitated the unemployed and inducement to boost economic growth. Both the World Bank and the AIIB each provided \$ 500 million to the CARES program respectively to improve the quality of life in Pakistan (Wang, et.al., 2020).

Philanthropists and civil society also helped in fulfilling the needs of vulnerable groups in pandemic. A huge quantity of food was provided to these groups from the wealthy persons of the areas. Nevertheless, there were reported cases of misuse of donations and charity as the people collected surplus food items and other things from different donors and later sold it back to shops (Personal Communication, January 4, 2021).

The federal government provided emergency assistance to needy families, including food subsidies and support, but this aid was barely enough for many of them. Ehsaas emergency cash program (previously Benazir Income Support Program) provided financial assistance of Rs. 12,000 (\$75) to each family and grant was given for twelve million families to overcome COVID-19. BISP was established in mid-2008, the largest social safety net of Pakistan, providing help in cash to vulnerable women of lower families. Ehsaas scheme began on April 9, 2020 and was expanded in May to four million unemployed workers (Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Social Security, 2020). The cash amount of Rs.12,000 was barely sufficient to cover even food cost. This was a temporary arrangement as the prime minister himself informed that cash disbursement program was not a solution and lifting the lockdown was crucial to improve the economy (Raza, 2020). However, the continuation of pandemic hindered the economic recovery and dire need of the state assistance was still there. A

demographer expert noted, “There is no choice but to provide the essentials like food, water and health care for the poorest 20 per cent of the population for the next few months. ... [t]he counterfactual is skyrocketing poverty, malnutrition and deaths of key household members that will be difficult to repair financially and emotionally” (Sattar, 2020). During the relaxation of lockdown in May 2020, the total number of cases was 175,000 and the death toll was 3,000 (The Express Tribune, 9 May 2020). Another step was reduction in banks’ interest rate as the State Bank of Pakistan (2020) lowered it from 13.25 to 7 percent from mid-March to June 2020, to improve the economy, facilitating the business community. However, this reduction was harmful for pensioners and common people as they invested their savings and get fixed profit from financial institutions. They were covering their domestic expenditure with this amount and lower profit rate damaged them, causing mental stress. In an overall view, cut in jobs raised unemployment, adding more persons in stream of poverty. According to the experts’ opinion, poverty rate would rise in Pakistan.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is an undeniable fact that compensation for economic loss is difficult in the post-pandemic period as the virus has equally damaged developed and developing countries. Even death toll was higher in the western world, despite the better quality of medicine and vaccination. In Pakistan, the poor segments of population were affected adversely due to COVID-19. It has increased the sufferings and hardships of the low-income groups and they would continue unabatedly with less or high intensity in different areas and territories. The poor sections have to struggle against various challenges in the pandemic as its impact was profound on them. These groups not only lost their jobs due to lockdown and social distancing but also lost hope of the next job as the same situation was prevailing throughout the country and uncertainty was found everywhere. After losing jobs, no alternative income sources were available during the pandemic. Vulnerability to enslavement by the employees was further strengthened because of virus as the unemployed or surplus workforce changed the market mechanism of demand and supply. Excess of the workforce led to exploitation, while serious health risks were also there as virus was posing a great threat. Less-crowded jobs became attractive as no one could afford to pay for medical care. The virus also reduced access to the healthy working environment. Migrant workers were already in the worst conditions due to the closure of markets, borders, transport and restrictions on movements. Even after lessening the threat of virus and opening of the economies, the businesses may not be as usual, at least in the near future. The travel industry, tourism, hotel business, construction and other crowded industries may continue to face hurdles. This situation is harmful for economic betterment of the poor classes. A major portion of population is not inclined to travel unless a dire need. This thinking has delayed the recovery of the related sectors. Awareness among women and other marginalized groups needs to be generated via media and other electronic sources. For victims of abuse and other person must be provided facilities of

hotlines and shelter homes. No one should be deprived of basic safety planning and escape plans, trapping in extreme situations. There are hard lessons for the world to learn for the future as the pandemic has no discrimination between the rich and the poor, developed or underdeveloped. The financially strong countries must think and consider the world's poor after this experience. The pandemic has given credible insights to think about the nature, what may be in store for mankind on the path to global recovery.

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