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Pandemic's Impact on Social Inequalities: Pakistan case

Alex Han

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the world in an unprecedented manner, as against the expectation. The start of the year 2020 was devastating because of the detrimental effects of Covid-19 on both societies and economies. It has not only challenged the status quo but also introduced a new statement of purpose to the world to survive. The closure of several small and big-sized businesses left only a thin employment opportunity available for millions of its citizens. The Pandemic has also exposed the loopholes in its health care system that need to be filled. This paper analyzed social inequalities and the unequal impact of the pandemic during the Covid-19 in the case of Pakistan through a reasonable amount of literature review. Sequel to the findings, this paper suggests some recommendations to bridge the gap in social inequalities in Pakistan.

Keywords: Social Inequalities, COVID-19, Challenges, Pakistan

1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 was considered as the beginning of a new start where humanity and progress will be mentioned and understood with maximum efforts towards the issues that challenge humankind. The Covid-19 pandemic has almost affected every country around the world in the last few years. Its wide-ranged negative implications have worsened the life for many, irrespective of their cultural moorings, geographical location, Sex, beliefs, and political affiliations. In some cases, these implications, have been seen causing more damages because of the vulnerability of the particular class up against the difficult financial and social challenges presented by the pandemic (World Bank,2010). Communities that were already marginalized and

had not much resistance to offer, proved to be the worst victims of the pandemic (Ali et al., 2020).

The subcontinent is one of the poorest regions in the world, and because of structural barriers like stereotyping women, racism, mistreatment based on beliefs, taboos, gender segregation, violation of merit, and several such intertwining factors, inequalities present in these societies have been exposed further. When the Covid-19 first reached the subcontinent, it was assumed that it would severely affect the local population because of the massive number of people living in slums and small households without having the facilities and resources to mitigate its impact. How these challenges have exacerbated the situation is something to look into (World Bank, 2010). The whole world is still facing this COVID-19 serious situation that has started from China and spread very fast all over the world. The Covid-19 pandemic has massively changed the direction of the world (Imran et al., 2020).

The surge of the pandemic across the world made millions of people jobless. The COVID-19 affected everyone from the society with maximum measures in this direction as the conventional means were altered and then the situation led towards a compromise over various dimensions (Ali et al., 2020). This paper looks to analyze social inequalities impacted by the pandemic in the case of Pakistan through a reasonable amount of literature review. Sequel to the findings, this paper attempts to present some recommendations to bridge the gap.

2. SOCIAL INEQUALITIES DURING PANDEMIC : LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic Inequalities

In the recent pandemic, some countries have been able to implement strict lockdowns, but some on the other hand avoided all-out restrictions on movement, considering its financial losses and risks. Researchers have extensively discussed the impact of the Covid-19 and variations in the response of different countries and the pattern of its spread work has also been done to minutely analyze the performance of different countries and the effectiveness of their policies in dealing with the pandemic (Ferreira, 2021). Shutting down the economies and closing businesses have made many countries suffer the financial cost across the globe. The poorest quintiles who were devoid of any government support and were also out of the security net had got the worst hit. For them to survive and sustain was a daunting task (Bosancianu et al., 2020)

Governments' priorities to increase tax collection, measures to support businesses, immigration policies affected the citizens disproportionately and it also appeared in divergence

in the financial status of people, separating poor ones from the rich ones. Economic inequalities make it difficult for governments to implement policies and maneuver within the framework of a particular policy (UNDP, 2020).

During the time of any financial crisis, war, or pandemics affecting the world, policymakers should be mindful on how their policies will work against the problem of inequality. The global leaders must be quick in their response to the perceived threat level. In Pakistan, some individuals have been seen violating the rules set by the government, because of their vested interests that Pakistan has been lucky in the sense that it somewhat escaped the ravages of the Covid-19 unhurt (Sohil et al., 2021). The impact of restrictions and lockdowns imparted disproportionate plague, more so in the case of financially weak class. Data shows that Pakistan was swift in reviving its economy despite the odds working against it. Irrespective of Pakistan's success in orchestrating the economic revival, however, the Imran Khan administration's tall claims, deep insight into the problem, raises the questions whether this economic recovery followed the essential protocols and if it's sustainable in the long run or not (Khalid et al., 2020). It's understandable that the virus has affected a huge chunk of the population, and for now, it might not be possible to eliminate it. The most vulnerable section of Pakistan's society during the pandemic was its daily wage earners who didn't have enough resources at their disposal to steer them through when everything was heading to closure (Shafi et al., 2020)

Women Labor Force

The women employees were gradually progressing upward before the pandemic. According to an estimate between January 2015 and December 2019, the number of women in higher positions increased from 23 to 28 percent.

Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 exacerbated the plight of working women and their participation (McKinsey Company, 2020). In the same context, in the wake of Covid-19, the service sector of nearly every economy around the world was hit hard. The impact on this section of the economy affected almost every person, but mostly, it had a negative impact on the participation of women labor force (Rate, 2021). Due to gender disparity, men and women fell into different categories of occupation. For example, service sector, which includes a restaurant, food production, textiles, etc., in turn left women in the most vulnerable areas of the economy in the crisis of pandemic. (Watkins et al., 2020). In the sectors where women lead in employment

such as healthcare and education, women mostly bear the impacts of the Covid-19 Crisis. (Shahid, 2020)

With Pakistan's local government's tenure ending in 2019, the system was due to have fresh local government elections. However, as the Covid-19 started spreading across the country, it forced provinces to postpone elections for an indefinite period. The federal government realized that it's crucial to postpone all countrywide events for the time being to ensure that things are under control and there is no obvious threat looming pertinent to the Covid-19 spread. By adopting this approach, the government made it certain that it doesn't expose voters to an elevated risk of catching a virus (Rasheed et al., 2021). Despite the fact that the government's decision was in line with the Covid-19 safety measures and protocols, the non-existent local governments left a massive void in the political structure of Pakistan. Women's representation in Pakistan's politics is already very insignificant and delays in the election process had severe implications for women participating in elections. Local body elections have around 30 seats specially allocated for women representatives who could have played their part in the development of their constituencies and in carrying out relief work in the wake of the pandemic catastrophe (Blau & Koebe & Meyerhofer, 2020). In the absence of local bodies, male-dominated relief programs at the federal level were initiated. Covid-19 Relief Tiger Force is one such example where unelected members had been assigned to carry out relief operations rather than the true elected members of the community, representing both sexes. It is deemed to have snatched the right of the citizens to raise concerns and express apprehensions, because of not having direct contact with the local leaders anymore (Chowdhury & Jomo, 2020).

Gender inequality

The skyrocketing rate of job loss of women labor due to the pandemic has further widened gender inequality. Growth in gender equality leads to the growth of the economy of a country. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 suggests "reducing gender inequality boosts an economy's growth, competitiveness, and readiness for the future" (Sharma & Chawla, 2021). The rate at which women loses a job is much higher than men. McKinsey Global Institute estimates that women have 1.8% more chances of losing a job than man. Women account for 55% of job losses and only 39% of employment globally. Researchers estimate that global GDP growth could be \$1 trillion lower in 2030 than it would be if women's unemployment simply tracked that of men in each sector (Watkins et al., 2020).

Daily Wage Earners & Private Employees

After the first wave of the Covid-19, Pakistan's authorities decided to impose strict lockdown to limit its spread. As a consequence of this step, daily wage earners and private employees found it immensely difficult to survive. Many daily wagers and those who relied on manual labor were left empty-handed (UNHCR, 2021). This discontinuance in operations brought production to a halt and dried up the work in large factories and industries that result in job loss for private employees. Pakistan's government soon realized that it will not be possible for them to extend the restrictions because of the country's bleak economic picture. Imran Khan's government was committed to its stance of safeguarding the interest of daily wagers, small businesses, and private workers (No, Nguyen, et al., 2020).

Lack of Self-Quarantine Facilities in Small Households

Quarantine has been adopted as a standard approach for persons who have been diagnosed with Covid-19. Certain countries implemented quarantine as a mandated period of isolation for Covid-19 suspects in order to slow the pandemic's spread. However, home isolation or self-quarantine is rarely effective in the case of many people living in impoverished nations, as the risk of infection by other family members increases dramatically as a result of overcrowding (Patel et al., 2021). Patients from Pakistan have reported how their family members become infected with the virus just days after they were diagnosed with Covid-19. To maintain successful isolation, a person need numerous facilities, including a separate room and bathroom, as well as space to engage in some healthful activities if possible. However, this is difficult to accomplish in relatively impoverished countries (Noreen et al., 2020).

The purpose of this is to protect the health of others by abstaining from contact with them for the specified duration. Experts demonstrate how readily viruses can attach to other surfaces, infecting the entire area. It is nearly impossible to adopt social separation in a crowded family when many people live under one roof. Concerning women and children, the limits imposed by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have significantly reduced the life standards of the overall population in general, women in articular (World Health Organization, 2019).

Disruptions in Health System

World Health Organization in its pulse survey after a year of the Covid-19 pandemic spotlighted the major gaps and disruptions in the health care system because of an influx of people infected by the Covid-19. It sketched a bleaker image of the countries from the developing world with weak health infrastructure. The health sector of Some of these countries was found on the cusp of collapse because it had been excessively burdened (World Health Organization, 2019).

Lack of Financial Support

Although it is believed that Pakistan has dodged the worst possible effects of the Covid-19 and the curve may have flattened, but there is still a lot to be seen especially for Pakistan's fragile economy which is desperately seeking foreign help in the form of loans and grants. The estimates made by Pakistan Economic Survey indicate that Pakistan had to incur economic losses of up to 2.5 trillion Pakistani rupees in the fiscal year 2020 Pakistan Institute of Development Economics in its research revealed that the rate of poverty may jump up from 23 percent to 57 percent due to economic slowdown as an aftermath of devastations induced by the Covid-19. Middle-class and private and small business owners had unfortunately been left with minimal support from the government besides Pakistan's failure to utilize money received as international grants (Ashfaq & Bashir, 2021).

3. DISCUSSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed an already existing divide in Pakistani society. There is a gulf present in the economic and social condition of the people hailing from different parts of the country. Baluchistan proved to be the most vulnerable province not just because it borders Iran, but also because of its underprivileged poor population who don't have the resources and knowledge to fight against this disease. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan an NGO based in Pakistan, tells that the Covid-19 has badly halted the progression of students in the Baluchistan province. Online classes forced these students not to get an education in person. Baluchistan as a province lacks resources to cater to the educational needs of its students, especially when they don't have internet facilities across the province for every citizen. The tribal areas of KPK are presenting a similar story as well as Pakistan administered Kashmir and GB where having a stable internet connection is a rarity.

Prisons in Pakistan are overcrowded, with an occupancy rate of 124 percent, which leaves prisoners at a high risk of getting infected. (UNODC, 2020). Concerning women, they've experienced increasing domestic violence during the countrywide lockdown, which suggests their vulnerability as a social class. Male members especially in poor Households gave vent to their frustration by committing violence against women of the family. Working women on the other hand, also felt serious Inequalities because most of them had lost their jobs due to uncertainty of the situation and risks of catching a virus. Women in such societies are expected to have more share of family responsibilities, so in that case, they wouldn't want to expose themselves to a virus and put the health and safety of their family on the line.

Daily wagers have been the most affected community along with private businessmen. Middle and lower-middle-class who didn't have enough savings found it hard to sustain for a longer period without any government assistance (UNHCR, 2021). People who were associated with flight tours and immigration had to wait for months before they finally had flight operations working. Nongovernment employees were left with no other options than borrowing money for themselves and their families. For a government, who inherited a fragile economy, it was not possible to bring every individual into the financial security net. The growth of Pakistan's economy has been badly hampered because of economic slow so during the pandemic Covid-19 when it was trying to consolidate itself.

The country's health sector was overburdened initially like any other country in the world, but luckily it sustained that pressure. With a soaring number of Covid patients admitted every day in the hospitals it made it challenging for the health care system to entertain other patients, particularly in government hospitals. Private hospitals' high cost is out the reach of Pakistan's poor population which created huge discrimination about people's health. At first, the government had made it mandatory to stay in quarantine centers for those who were living in small Households, and the people having big villas were exempted from this condition which also created a sense of deprivation in poor people who had to leave their families members for two weeks.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 pandemic has inflicted chaos on people all around the world but more so in the case of poor regions of the world where this chaos is resonating more. Pakistan is one of the third-world countries which suffered on all levels due to COVID-related uncertainty. Although it was lucky in acquiring aids, grants, and donations from neighboring China and the

international community, still a lot needed to be done to completely reverse the economic downfall. Women constitute more than 50% of the total population of Pakistan and their participation in economic activity is of prime importance. Pakistan has witnessed an increasing number of women leaving their jobs and representation in the election process because of COVID-19 induced delays and sustained pressure from all sides.

The middle and lower-middle-class of the country are continuously suffering, firstly because of the economic slowdown and later, because of the high inflation rate that has increased the problem of the already marginalized class who is losing its purchasing power every day. The government failed to utilize foreign aid and dispensed it to the lowest segment of society. Pakistan's social and economic condition is not satisfactory at all, with the country desperate to seek international financial support straight after lifting the COVID restrictions. Children who are considered to be the future of any country shouldn't be left alone. Pakistan unfortunately, couldn't do much to help its student community to continue their studies without disruptions and delays. Particularly in remote parts of the country, it was next to impossible to arrange online classes which also resulted in the government's decision to promote students to the next class without holding examinations. Students lost time, as one academic year gets wasted.

Private Employees and trade associations have been forcing the government to lift restrictions, especially during the shopping to fuel and resuscitate their businesses which had come to a halt. The government was, however, quick in its response to vaccinating the majority of the population so, it could protect them from any potential health threat as soon as possible. For the government, to revive the economy will take some more months, because its consequences are long-lasting. It'll be interesting to see how the government is going to act to increase production and limit trade losses.

Given the foregoing, the following measures are proposed in order to tackle social inequalities worsened by the pandemic:

- The government should take measures to expand and strengthen its health system so they'll be well equipped to fight against any future challenge.
- Investing money to acquire state of the art of facilities. Women should be encouraged to take part in every activity. Their participation both in the voting process and in contesting elections is a sign of a healthy society.

- Economic reforms are needed on every level to conspire any meaningful and long-term economic revival.
- Discrimination against anybody by anyone should only be seen as a social evil. Government should put all its efforts into creating a friendly environment for investors.
- The health of every citizen should be given equal importance and for that purpose, government hospitals should be updated and funded to have all the necessary equipment and the services of top health experts working as government employees.
- The importance of gender equality; which can be achieved only when women will be empowered, can be understood by the fact that it is goal number 5 in The Sustainable Development Goals.
- The vaccination process should be done rapidly to protect citizens and shed a burden on hospitals. Government can't allow daily wagers and private employees to live on their own without any financial support. It demands concrete measures to bring these people into the government's financial security net and rehabilitate them.
- Opening up small industries and daily manual labor work should be the top priority so they get their income source back. People should be educated on social distancing and other COVID-19 preventive measures.

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