



COVID-19 Crisis and Women in Asia

Reflections from COVID-19 and the Prospects for
Gender Justice in Pakistan

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Introduction

During the first quarter of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, workers around the globe were severely affected by the rapid shift in circumstances, in particular the countrywide lockdowns. In all countries, women and girls had to bear a greater share of the burden as their jobs were disrupted while duties at home increased. Many found themselves vulnerable to abuse and gender-based violence (GBV) behind closed doors and isolated from any support mechanisms. Additionally, women working in non-essential service industries such as food service, hospitality and domestic work (housekeeping and childcare) were more likely to be laid off or exploited during the pandemic and resulting economic crisis. Homebased workers, a significant portion of the informal workforce, experienced multidimensional uncertainties due to the absence of social protection schemes for them, financial insecurity and unprecedented economic vulnerability. These effects of lockdown were more acute in least developed, developing, and emerging economies, where they exacerbated existing gender and income inequalities. This paper aims to understand how women are affected differently than men in crisis situation and individuals and communities, with a focus on the pandemic's impact on their livelihoods. It highlights the importance of understanding the severity of differential impacts pandemic and other crises can have on women. The paper is based on an extensive desk research of relevant studies that takes stock of the impact of the pandemic on women and girls and presents a comprehensive snapshot. This paper call for an intersectional gender-based policy approach to address the vulnerabilities of women and girls and to protect them from the economic, psychological and physical impacts of the pandemic and post-pandemic periods.

Attitudes and practices around gender and COVID-19 in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the government adopted emergency legal frameworks restricting mobility, public meetings, and official gatherings. From the onset of the pandemic-

induced lockdowns, there was a rising trend in incidents of domestic abuse against women trapped at home with their abusers (Parveen, 2021). Research has shown that crisis and disasters often exacerbate intimate partner and non-partner GBV. It also may further lead to new forms of violence against women (Mittal and Singh, 2020). Data from Pakistan during COVID-19 notes that women faced physical violence from partners, in-laws or other relatives. They reported being slapped, punched, kicked, beaten and pushed. It was reported that physical violence was often accompanied by verbal abuse (HomeNet South Asia, 2020).

It was estimated that 12.3 million to 18.5 million workers in Pakistan would be laid off in different sectors of economy in the aftermath of the shutdowns during the pandemic (Haider, 2020). The significant garment and textile sector were particularly hard hit, with half a million jobs cut in Punjab alone (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2020). In addition to other exploitation of workers, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed extreme forms of human rights violations within the local and global garment and apparel supply chains, including the "wage theft" that pushed a huge workforce below the poverty line (Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), 2021). The economic impacts, as in all countries, were particularly, harsh for the informal economy.

In Pakistan, 72.5 per cent of workers are in the informal sector. Home-based women workers, a significant portion of the informal workforce, experienced multidimensional uncertainties due to the absence of social protection schemes for them, financial insecurity, and unprecedented economic vulnerability. Within those, women are expected to experience the short and the long-term impacts of COVID-19 disproportionately and differently than men (UNDP, 2020).¹ The government of Pakistan actively tried to ensure the security of wages and jobs by allocating USD 730 million (Rs. 200 billion) for labourers in general during the pandemic. However, no specific allocation was made for informal sector workers, let alone women workers who make a significant portion of the total workforce.

¹ The report is no longer available online.

COVID-19, economic shocks and the socio-economic impacts for women workers in Pakistan

Economic shocks in Pakistan

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented level of economic insecurity, resulting in widespread job loss, business closures, slowdown in business activity and reduced working hours (Tas et al, 2021). There has been unstable growth of Pakistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since 2021 due to the continuing COVID-19 surges and lockdowns. Only during the second quarter of 2022, local economy slowly resumed as the number of cases decreased. Pakistan's unemployment rate was predicted to surge to 28 per cent as result of COVID-19. A 30 per cent redundancy in the formal sector was projected resulting in a Rs. 189 billion (approx. 660 million USD) impact on the private sector. The economic recovery is still an ongoing process. While the whole of Pakistani economy suffered as a whole, it is the informal economy, which remained more vulnerable to the pandemic induced economic shocks and downturns (Bari et al, 2020). The informal economy includes home-based workers (HBWs) and care workers with no formal contractual work arrangements. In Pakistan, there are more than 12 million HBWs, rising at 5 per cent per year (Thaheem, 2021). During the pandemic, home-based work, small scale industries, arts and entertainment were the worst-hit businesses. HBWs suffered more than 40 per cent of the total

losses, followed by arts and entertainment (33 per cent) and industrial workers (30 per cent) (The Asia Foundation and Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, 2020). Under the existing social security laws, informal workers are ineligible for social protection. The sector is also marked by limited access to capital, credit constraints and high rates of business failures compared with the formal sector.

Gender gaps in socio-economic fields in Pakistan

Pakistan has one of the largest economic participation and opportunity gender gaps of 66.9 per cent, alongside India, Iran and Afghanistan (World Economic Forum 2022). Labour force participation among women of all ages is 21.4 per cent and male labour force participation is 67.9 per cent (PBS, 2022). This disparity further translates into the wage gap of 6.20. In other words, women earn 62 per cent of men's wages for work of equal value (World Economic Forum, 2022). This inequality in the wage structure indicates women have limited access to opportunities for work and employment. The gap between men and women's earnings has also increased over time (UNDP, 2021). In Pakistan, the inequality in access to opportunities and information is the major barrier against women's economic empowerment and progression. Generally, this is attributed to a lack of gender-centric policy and

- Pakistan current estimated population is 224,218,687.
 - GDP per capita in Pakistan was \$1,186 in 2020-21.
 - Pakistan has a modified Palma ratio of 4.7, meaning that the richest quintile has 4.7 times the income of the poorest quintile.
 - UNDP Gender Inequality Index Value 0.538.
 - UNDP Gender Inequality Index Rank 154.
 - Military expenditure (2020) 1,289,134 Rs. (In million).
 - Health expenditure (2020) 25,494 Rs. (In million).
 - Education expenditure (2020) 83,363 Rs. (in million).
 - Total external debt (2020) 245,344 Rs. (In million)
- (Pakistan budget salient features 2020-21)

According to the Human Development Gender Inequality Index (HDI) for 2021-22, Pakistan presently ranks 161 out of 192 states. As compared to its 154th ranking in the year 2020-2021 the decline in the ranking is due to low development in achieving the adequate targets in health, income and education indicators.

Pakistan's position on the Global Gender Gap Index (2022) is 145th out of 146 countries representing poor performance of women's overall political participation, education, health and economic opportunities related participation.

Source: UNDP, 2023

execution, patriarchal and stereotypical attitudes at the place of work, harassment in workplaces, systemic barriers, income inequality, and typical stereotypes that are used to define the role of women. Young women stepping into the workforce face challenges in career selection, finding opportunities on a par with men, equal wages, equality in status, decent jobs, secure mobility and transportation provisions, and above all job security. These barriers are further aggravated as women enter the formal economy. Apart from the gender wage gap, there is a lack of gendered infrastructure at workplaces, discrimination in equal opportunities for leadership and professional development, social security, old age benefits, occupational health and safety, unemployment benefits along with discriminatory attitudes and surveillance during maternity and job placement (UNDP, 2021). The incidence of involuntary unemployment is also higher for females at 8.9 per cent, compared to 5.5 per cent for males.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), out of the only 13.5 million, 20 per cent women take part in Pakistan's labour force. Among them, 7 million women working in agriculture fall under the category of contributing family workers, and remain unrecognized and unpaid. The urban female labour force participation of Pakistan is amongst the lowest across the world. It is worth noting that 67 per cent of the female work force in Pakistan works in the non-agriculture informal economy and almost 80 per cent of the HBWs in Pakistan are women (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), 2022). HBWs in particular is considered an "acceptable" choice for women who need additional income to support their families (Akhtar and Vanek, 2013).

A majority of the female workforce in Pakistan is employed in the informal economy, with women from poor households in particular lacking access to decent employment. Women workers in the informal economy bear a double burden of poverty and gender bias in social and economic life and are extremely vulnerable. They come from poor and rural communities and have settled in urban areas amidst rampant poverty and near absence of decent employment. The commodification of women in domestic service, including exploitation by intermediaries or 'middle men' of either gender entrench patriarchal values and subordination of women workers. They are underpaid and are often subjected to sexual harassment.

Gendered impacts of the pandemic on women workers in Pakistan

With the employment outcomes so unfavourable for women, any disproportionate gender effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to worsen these gaps. The economic shock had a differential impact across various sub-sectors. Service providers experienced 90 per cent reduction in wage payment, followed by agricultural workers (46 per cent) and HBWs (44 per cent). Permanent lay-off rates for technicians and professionals were as high as 25 per cent. Most of the sectors experienced fairly high reductions in working hours. This owes to the fact that during the lockdown period, markets were open for only a limited period of time and remained closed over the weekends. The pandemic has crushed many women-led businesses, further hindering their financial independence and decision-making in the household, and pushed back all manner of empowerment prospects.

Women who were employed in various subsectors faced severe economic shocks, 22 per cent reported reduction in their hourly wage or salary. More than 37 per cent reported delays in wage payment. Around 16 per cent further experienced reduction in non-pecuniary benefits (Bari et al, 2021). Moreover, as a regular practice within households, women were forced to give away their earnings to the family with less independence on the decision of its usage (UNDP, 2021).

Among the women workers employed in the informal sector, 17 per cent were temporarily laid off, while 2 per cent lost their jobs permanently and 82 per cent experienced a reduction in pay (Bari et al, 2020). Declining employment trends by sector revealed that almost all the arts and entertainment industry workers were temporarily laid off due to the lockdown (ibid). Around 70 per cent of beauticians and 65 per cent of domestic house helpers were temporarily laid off. The report also notes that although HBWs experienced a reduction in wage payment, only 20 per cent of them lost their jobs. Moreover, women HBWs have lost access to markets and orders because of closure of markets and transport services.

Bari et al (2021) mentions that "as businesses adapted to the changing dynamics during the lockdown period, female workers employed in these informal businesses had to employ measures to shield them from the impact". More than 75 per cent of the females switched jobs from what they were previously doing in February

2020. Almost 40 per cent of the employees spent savings to cover income losses, 40 per cent borrowed money, 50 per cent had to sell their assets to cover the losses incurred and 20 per cent were forced to violate lockdown measures to earn a living (ibid).

The pandemic also accentuated a disproportionate increase in women's unpaid care work, as well as increasing their reported rates of stress, anxiety and exposure to violence. The sectors where women are more likely to be employed, mostly in education and health, were affected severely, yet the post-pandemic recovery was faster for males.

COVID-19 and gender justice in the garment and textile industry

Pakistan's textile manufacturing industry has been the most significant pillar of the country's manufacturing sector, as a major source of export earnings and key contributor to the GDP. It also absorbs a huge skilled and unskilled workforce of the country. About 60 per cent of Pakistan's exports are comprised of textile products, employing about 40 per cent of the workforce (Stotz, 2015). Due to the unequal power relations within the existing growth and development model of Pakistan's garment export industry, the workers are always at the worse end with small gains (AFWA, 2021). Pakistan falls under the supplier category of production within the low-wage South Asian countries. The inadequate labour-inspection enforcement mechanism leads to workers facing serious consequences where brands retain high control over profits and maintain value of marketing, retail and design, leaving less spaces for workers' gain in the Global South.

There was a sharp decline in wages and household income of women working in the garment and textile sector. Around 81 per cent of the workers in a survey cited by AFWA (2021) were pushed below the international poverty line of the World Bank (measured at 3.2 USD purchasing power parity) between March and May 2020. The women workers faced precarity within the garment supply chains when they had to cut down their regular maintenance and subsistence during

the lockdown, while facing increased prices of essential items of daily consumption.

Women workers lost more working days than their male counterparts in 2020. A survey conducted by Asia Floor Wage Alliance in Pakistan noted "that women had less chances of getting reemployed than men as factories reopened. Most women workers who were laid off or terminated turned to informal work". On average, women lost 43 per cent of their wages in 2020 whereas men suffered a loss of 27 percent (AFWA, 2021).

Most of the work of the supply chains at local tiers is subcontracted work done by women, with no trace of data count. It is important to note that women engaged in the piece-rate work are mostly concentrated in the garment and textile value chain. They are clustered in the low-skill waged, sub-contracted work sector. The women doing work at home or in informal units are supplied work by the contractor or middle person. And the contractor subletting the work to women home workers has the authority to practice exploitation of all forms: low or no wages; order cancellation; delayed payments; charges or payments withheld for maintenance of equipment, transportation, raw material, electricity or other costs.

It was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic that HBWs who are subcontracted by national and international supply chains reported that they did not receive orders, or regular orders were not renewed for weeks or even months after the onset of COVID. The pandemic affected daily wage earners dramatically, leaving them laid off and without money or work. As the lockdown relaxed and factories started their operations, women factory workers remained unemployed as employers only allowed men workers to resume their jobs.

During COVID-19, terminations and layoffs of workers heightened the pre-existing inequalities and significantly affected the more vulnerable segments of the garment workforce, in particular women casual workers. In terms of recovery, it is likely to have a lasting impact on employment relations and work standards in the industry (ibid).

Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19 in Pakistan

Sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation in the workplace interferes with women's full and equal participation in the workforce. Women across the globe face an excess of problems, and among the most serious is violence at all levels in the social and economic platforms. GBV affects 1 in 3 women globally in different forms. Pakistan is no exception in this regard. The Thomson Reuters Foundation Survey 2018 ranked Pakistan as the sixth most dangerous country in the world for women (Ali, 2018) with cases of sexual crimes and domestic violence recording a rapid rise.

Almost 28 per cent of women aged between 15-49 have experienced physical violence at some point since the age of 15, and 6 per cent have experienced sexual violence. Around 7 per cent of women who have ever been pregnant have experienced violence during their pregnancy, and 34 per cent of ever-married women have experienced spousal physical, sexual, or emotional violence. The most common type of spousal violence is emotional violence (26 per cent), followed by physical violence (23 per cent). Around 5 per cent of married women have experienced spousal sexual violence (Pakistan, 2020). Evidence suggests that epidemics and stresses involved in coping with the epidemics may increase the risk of domestic abuse and other forms of GBV.

Cases of GBV increased during the pandemic in Pakistan. In 2020, 57 per cent of cases of violence against women across the country were reported in the province of Punjab. Sindh had the second-highest instance with 27 per cent of the national total, while had 8 per cent, 6 per cent were in Gilgit-Baltistan and 2 per cent of reported cases were from Baluchistan. The total number was 2, 297 (Parveen, 2021). Domestic and online violence complaints intensified between March and November 2020. Dawn newspaper (2020ii) reported "there have been many more complaints of [GBV] in

the country in 2020 than usual due to the pandemic," citing data shared at a seminar in December that year. Lack of access to health care and insufficient responses to the GBV cases on the part of the state remained a challenge. Courts and shelter homes were closed due to lockdowns, causing delay in access to safety and justice. The frequency of the domestic violence instances highlights the prevalence and social approval of many harmful practices inflicting violence upon women and girls in the name of culture and tradition. It also calls for a close monitoring of pro-women legislation, to ensure its implementation without any loopholes.

"Loss of livelihood has led to domestic violence. For example, a man from Okara, unable to provide food and other expenses, murdered his wife when she asked for food to cook. A FIR [First Information Report to police that begins criminal proceedings] was filed and he was sent to jail. In Jaffarabad, a man facing extreme mental stress due to the closure of his business beat up his 14-year-old niece, and an intoxicated husband (a daily wage) severely beat up his wife (a home-based worker) after the topic of household expenses came up." (Shirkat Gah Women Resource Centre, 2020)

During the lockdown, decline of the women's protection services increased the vulnerability of women, girls and transgender (Dawn, 2020). Women and girls were put at high risk due to the unavailability of the already limited psychosocial counselling services to specifically address the psychological needs during the pandemic. Given the current environment of decreased economic activities, financial uncertainties and a situation of lockdown being faced in Pakistan, heightened tensions translated into women facing more vulnerabilities.

Frontline health workers and the pandemic

The Lady Health Workers Programme was initiated in Pakistan in 1994, with the support of the World Health Organization. A key aim was to foster community participation and bring about changes in societal attitudes towards basic health issues and family planning through a cadre of community health workers. It is evident that areas where lady health workers (LHWs) are active, maternal and infant mortality rates are lower. But despite their impact, the LHWs are struggling for the recognition of their rights and position. Over the years, serious violent and physical attacks have been inflicted upon them, incidents that remain largely unaddressed and unaccounted for (Khalid and Ai, 2020).

During the first phase of the pandemic, when people were not accepting the onset and repercussions of COVID-19, LHWs faced many challenges on the ground in continuing their services in communities. Trainings were organized for LHWs on combating COVID-19. They held sessions with community women over the phone, and provided orientation and sensitization on the prevention of COVID and keeping the family safe. Counselling sessions with the expecting mothers were held to lessen their anxiety due to lockdowns, increased household chores and the uncertain situation. However, reaching out to expecting women became difficult and challenging for the LHWs themselves due to the spread of COVID. Since the LHWs were restricted from entering houses, they could not monitor the growth of babies in the community for almost three months. Likewise, the routine immunization of mothers and babies was affected. Moreover, women could not avail themselves of family planning services. The LHWs, despite challenges, did not stop working and continued their jobs while observing safety measures and risking their lives. During the vaccination drive against COVID-19, the LHWs' role became crucial to sensitize and mobilize communities for vaccination amid several cases of fake news and propaganda about vaccination.

The onset of COVID exposed the gaps, shortcomings and limited capacity of the hospitals and health care systems to address and manage pandemic and large-scale public health emergencies (Khalid and Ali, 2020). They point out that Pakistan initially lacked "standard operating procedures" due to low funding, lack of governance, and dearth of equipment along with low medical staffing and supplies. LHWs have been pivotal in managing and spreading large scale awareness

and health campaigns on the epidemic, prevention and counselling during the pandemic. While offering door-to-door services in the second phase of the pandemic and educating the communities, motivating and sensitizing the families on protection through vaccination, the LHWs themselves did not have full health coverage and protection. The trained workforce of the LHWs was diverted to a new task, for which they were not prepared. Their original work and duties were hampered with additional tasks with no additional remuneration at the cost of risk to their lives. LHWs emerged as a front-line defense within the community. This also highlights the limitation of the health sector to hire additional trained and effective workforce during a pandemic such as COVID-19.

During a pandemic, community health workers can also be used as translators, cultural mediators, and healthcare facilitators – capacities which are often downplayed. As the number of COVID-19 cases increased in Pakistan, LHWs across the country actively participated in awareness campaigns.

Nimra Rasheed, who works for the Lady Sanitary Patrol, run by the District Health Authority of Lahore, said that she received coronavirus awareness training in March. "My duties were not only limited to creating awareness, I was also responsible for collecting nasal swabs from COVID-19 patients and safely take them back to the labs," she was quoted as saying in a news report (Noor, 2020).

Similarly, Razia Begum, an LHW from the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was sent to her regular client houses to create awareness about protective measures during the pandemic. She provided information about the concept of social distancing, the importance of washing hands, using sanitizers, and wearing a mask as safety measure. Razia shared that "99 per cent of the families I visited, carefully listened to the instructions and asked pertinent questions for their safety. I also discussed the possible introduction of a COVID-19 vaccine in the coming year to mentally prepare the members of my community" (ibid).

Even though LHWs sincerely performed their duties during the COVID-19 campaign, the workers interviewed complained of receiving limited or no personal protection equipment or sanitizers. "I was

just provided a 50 ml sanitizer bottle,” Halima Leghari was quoted as saying. “We had to spend out of our own pockets for our safety from the deadly disease. If they deputed us for the task, they should have taken care of us too.”

Nursing staff in the private sector face similar gender discrimination in their contractual agreements. Facing discrimination in employment, having been denied holiday pay, social security, pensions, and only receiving stipends and facing harassment and violence at the place of work, the women working in the health sector kept serving others at the cost of putting their own lives in danger.

The response and shortcomings

During the pandemic, it is very important to note that 37 per cent of working population i.e. 20.63 million workers either lost their jobs or could not work due to COVID-19 lockdown. About 6.7 million people in Pakistan experiences a reduction in income. Almost half of the working population was badly affected due to the closure of businesses and lockdown. The daily wagers (usually construction workers), casual workers and own-account workers in non-agriculture sectors such as shopkeepers, street vendors, and taxi drivers, were the most affected segments of the workforce according to the survey report (PBS, 2020). However, no gender-disaggregated data is available to see how women were affected.

The absence of relevant consolidated gender-disaggregated data within the government limited its outreach for distribution of food, medicines, and other utilities during the lockdown. Moreover, the COVID-19 response initiated by government was unidimensional. Civil society organizations (CSOs) were not engaged in the planning and execution of the survey. It is important to note that CSO outreach within communities creates a viable opportunity for reaching out to the masses through their existing networks. Excluding workers organizations and other CSOs from the consultative process created a void in the implementation of decent work country programs. A close coordination mechanism with organizations working in gender and social justice is extremely important for receiving social protection and social assistance benefits by the state during times of a pandemic like COVID.

In the absence of any robust plans for dealing with the situation and ensuring better coordination among the CSO and networks, it was observed that there were no holistic distribution plans. There were communities who received a higher quantity of food items, while many communities and clusters were simply ignored. In the absence of a comprehensive disaster risk response during the pandemic, communities faced multiple crises due to ineffective or absent local governments and inactive provincial and district disaster-management authorities. Given the weak baseline nutritional status of women and girls, it

is expected that they suffered more from the food insecurity situation prevailing during the pandemic.

For example, the federal social protection programs, such as the EHSAAS cash programs could not adequately cover the urban masses of working classes who lost their jobs due to closure of shops, factories and enterprises. The absence of any mechanism for accessing the top-down presence of workers in the manufacturing supply chains the presented another serious issue. Using the database from the previous Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), cash transfers under EHSAASS program were initially given to the beneficiaries in the first term of the pandemic relief package. Since this package covered only the registered BISP beneficiaries, a large majority of the population residing in the rural and urban areas did not receive any monetary support under the EHSAAS COVID initiative, including women workers in the agriculture sector and those working in the informal economy. Women's organizations brought the issue to the policy table by gathering evidence from the ground. However, despite the governments' profound announcements, a large segment of workers, including the women working in the agriculture sector and in the non-agriculture informal sector along with those working in the formal sector as casual workers, all of whom were not registered as workers, did not receive any cash grants even under the extended EHSAAS COVID initiative of the federal government.

Similar observations apply to the implementation of minimum wages. As the factories and shops closed down during the COVID lockdowns, workers were left jobless without any information about wages during the closure periods. Despite provincial governments announcing that company and business owners must not lay off workers and should continue to pay them salaries or minimum wages, unemployment rose since many male and female factory workers, contractual workers and private schoolteachers were laid off or denied wages (Shirkat Gah Women Resource Center, 2020). In the unregulated sector, women DWs, HBWs, daily wagers and the transgender communities were amongst the most affected. Women HBWs faced hardships to secure new orders during closure of product markets.

Role of feminist organizations in policymaking

In creating greater sensitization and awareness on the safety protocols, women's rights organization played an effective role within the communities through their community engagement programmes. Feminist organizations were seen working and reaching out to the communities in urban areas, raising awareness on protection from COVID-19 including vaccination, and sharing government plans. All this is an important area of intervention, where an effective plan of action and dissemination strategy could have ensured that a higher percentage the masses was reached. Several feminist organizations and women's rights organization were gathering first-hand information about human rights, labour and women's rights violations and reporting cases. Analysis of the situation on the ground with regards to highlighting policy gaps was conducted and shared at wider and higher levels. CSOs including women's and labour organizations can play an important supporting role in assisting the government in collecting data and statistics, measuring impacts and highlighting the factual situation on the ground in times of a pandemic such as COVID-19.

The COVID pandemic, as a revelation, has provided a critical reflection on the state national and provincial social policies, their loose inter-connectivity, and weak implementation mechanism for combating similar situations in the future. Rebuilding after the pandemic is an opportunity for feminist movements and organizations to engage with the policymakers for intervening in the social policy making processes and ensuring transparency and accountability in their implementation.

With the experience and their deep understanding of the issues, feminist organizations can present possible opportunities to intervene into policy making ensuring the mitigation of harmful practices and building gender-equal economies. Surely, this is an enormous task for the feminists, with lots of challenges within the country with increased polarized politics. However, with their insightful practices, and theoretical approaches, they can conduct a critical analytic preview of the existing policies and based on the analytic review, collectively prepare a development justice framework. They can thus contribute to effective and collective advocacy and lobbying for promoting social and economic rights.

7. Conclusion and policy recommendation

This paper has aimed to investigate selectively the impact of the COVID pandemic on the lives and labour market situation of the women in Pakistan.

In order to generate economic and social policy recommendations based on the evident presented in this paper, it is important to:

1. Understand the macroeconomic and social policy environment prevailing in the country not only to recover from the impacts of the pandemic but also to prepare for future crises. Entrapped in the world's capitalist system, the policy makers need to adopt and locally promote policies based on local priorities and needs focusing on redistribution. Hence preparing the vulnerable groups in the lowest strata for preparedness.
2. The multifaceted crisis of the state, politics and society is making the situation graver in absence of effective local governments' setups. The trickle-down impact through policy making, political devolution and implementation needs to be in place with institutional mechanism backed by constitutional support. Institutional, fiscal and administrative reforms ensuring women participation are essential to effectively empower the third tier of government. The existing macroeconomic social policy making and implementation require adoption of distributive policies developed and implemented locally by women, poor and marginalized.
3. It is now widely recognized that an important instrument to influence macroeconomic and social policy towards greater gender inclusivity is to adopt a more gender-inclusive approach to budgeting. Recently, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Pakistan office in close co-operation with the Women's Parliamentary Caucus has developed a strategy paper on gender-responsive budgeting, and conducted workshops on the topic for female parliamentarians with the assistance of international technical experts. Applying a gender perspective to the budget would indeed go a long way towards contributing to a more gender-equal distribution of public spending, and would be an effective vehicle to address the gender gaps exacerbated by the pandemic as highlighted in this paper. The policy

makers and parliamentarians need to prioritize and mainstream women (gender) issues, without any politicising, within their respective political parties and in parliament on regular basis ensuring that every perspective is considered and every voice is heard in decision making.

4. Another theme that emerged from the evidence presented in this paper is that of the disproportionately negative impact on the work lives of women in the informal economy. This is not a COVID-induced phenomenon that is specific to Pakistan. Rather, workers in the informal economy worldwide suffered much more from both the health and economic impacts of the pandemic than those working in the formal economy. The situation of the informal-economy women workers during the pandemic, as described above, points to the fact that unless and until these workers are recognized and registered in a registry of informal-economy workers they will continue to be excluded from any social protection intervention during a health or economic shock such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-COVID, there is widespread policy and programmatic development taking place in developing countries towards formalizing informal-economy enterprises and workers. In Pakistan, the foundation of this work has been laid by establishing the Informal Economy Workers' Unit at the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety. However, considerably more political will need to be garnered in order to take forward policies for formalizing informal economy in a robust and timely manner. This can be ensured through inclusivity, empowerment and representation of women and marginalized groups at all levels. Through political will, inclusivity, administrative and fiscal reforms a proper mechanism for formalizing the informal economy can be established which further ensures fully protected and secure women labour work force.
5. The evidence relating to the spike in GBV cases during COVID, as presented in this paper, signals the inefficacy of the state to respond in a timely and sensitive manner to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on GBV. The paper emphasizes on greater synergy needed between

the state institutions responsible for ensuring implementation of the federal and provincial laws relating to GBV. The CSOs and feminist organizations that are actively involved in addressing the causes and consequences of GBV as well as the rehabilitation of survivors of GBV. It's important to focus on the leadership development of the women work force in the informal economy by enhancing their awareness on the pro women and pro-labour laws in order to deal effectively with the arising GBV and labour violation related situations within community. Focus should be on strengthening the community led redress mechanism led by women leaders. Women voices need to be heard and valued during development of redress mechanisms. Experiences of women should be considered for robust and effective policy making processes.

6. A common thread running through the case examples presented in this paper is that the policy-formulation exercise relating to the response of the state to the pandemic did not effectively engage with the segments of the population for which that policy response was being designed and implemented. This lack of consultative mechanism has also been reported in the case of devastating natural and humanitarian disasters in Pakistan such as the 2008 earthquake, the 2010 floods and more recently, the 2022 floods. In the spirit of promoting social and gender justice during and after a pandemic, as well as in the case of other humanitarian disasters, it is recommended to strengthen the process and institutions of social dialogue to reconstitute or reconstruct the social construct in Pakistan.
7. It's also significant to invest in innovation, insurance and investment. During situations like COVID-19 innovation is likely to support the local women to respond to the unexpected and unknown challenges pertaining to economic, livelihood crisis and violence related situations. Likewise, insurance in all forms may protect them from uncertain contingencies. Social protection in all forms provides a cushion to women living below or near to poverty line and specifically women in the informal economy. Therefore, investment in insurance may further provide an opportunity for women to rebuild better future for themselves and their families, enabling them to cope up with emergency related situations.
8. To conclude it all, it is important to develop a mechanism for safeguarding the livelihoods of women in the informal economy by investing in the leadership development, mobilizing, organizing and meaningful participation in decision making. Similarly, investing in the innovation for economic empowerment of women for sustainable livelihoods and reducing labour related gender gaps. A substantial nexus between economic empowerment and gender transformative disaster response with possible participation of women from community and engagement of relevant stakeholders, plays an instrumental role in utilizing the promising potential of women for meaningful decision-making, risk reduction and early recovery. All these steps at the local community levels may play a vital role to promote the rights and agency of women in decision-making for possible solutions.

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