

The Impacts of COVID-19 on the Coal Mine Laborers of District Shangla

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ABSTRACT

Coal mining plays a significant role in a country's economic growth. Unfortunately, coal mine laborers have remained a marginalized workforce in Pakistan. The situation is exceedingly dismal, even in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The dwellers of the outskirts of district Shangla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, are primarily working in the coal mines of different parts of the country. The coal mine laborers of district Shangla were inflicted with hardships due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This study primarily focuses on the challenges the coal mine laborers faced during COVID-19. The study is qualitative, and primary and secondary sources are used for data collection. Purposive sampling was used for conducting interviews with different respondents. Collected data is analyzed through narrative analysis to determine coal mine laborers' challenges. The research also follows the conceptual paradigms on violent structural oppression while investigating different practices with which the laborers are oppressed and exploited. Through in-depth interviews with the respondents and reviewed literature, this study discovers and uncovers that COVID-19 impacted laborers regarding health and economic deprivation and created hurdles in their easy movement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, Coal Mine Labor, Impacts, Shangla

INTRODUCTION

Coal is a significant global energy source after oil and gas in the international arena. It accounts for approximately forty percent of the world's largest source of electricity production and is vital for generating primary energy for the world, leading to development and progress. Coal production is the fundamental economic activity of many states worldwide (Ullah et al., 2016). Coal is extracted from mines through coal mine laborers; however, coal mining has remained one of the deadliest laborer-intensive tasks throughout the centuries and is still prevalent in the 21st century. Due to a lack of facilities and equipment, many diligent coal mine laborers have lost their lives in the field. Mine laborers' lack of safety and precautionary measures has resulted in colossal incidents in coal mines. The industrial revolution in the developed world has transformed the process of vigorously

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extracting coal in mines; using technologies and equipment has made it easier and safer. However, it is unfortunate that under-developed countries like Pakistan still use centuries-old procedures, extracting coal in the deadliest way, ultimately endangering workers' lives. They still use course and conventional equipment used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The safety and protection of the lives of coal mine laborers depend on the Coal Mine Safety Regulations. Safety is of utmost concern regarding coal mine laborers, particularly in Pakistan, India, and China, due to the high percentage of unwarranted lethal accidents (Shahani et al., 2020).

In Pakistan, the preponderance of coal mines is not well mechanized nor accustomed to using unscathed and efficacious technologies due to the sparseness of economic resources and unawareness of precautionary measures to avoid deadly risks and adversities (Wang et al., 2013). Coal in Pakistan is extracted through reckless conventional and manual methods without complying with international coal mining protocols and standards. However, mine laborers extract the coal using their hands as they are not equipped with contemporary advancements and sophisticated technologies. Therefore, they have poor access to modern and advanced coal mining techniques for coal extraction that are practiced in developed countries.

Coal is extracted using underground mining methodologies such as room and pillar and longwall mining customized to local conditions (Jaddon et al., 2004). Consequently, the ineffective enforcement and lack of stringent implementation of safety and protective measures have led to many fatal and lethal accidents in coal mines in Pakistan. Moreover, gas explosions and blasts occur frequently during coal extraction in underground coal mines (Sim, 2014). The main reasons for recurrent causalities include the absence of interest, investment, and government enforcement. This leads to inadequate equipment, technical advancement, inappropriate infrastructure, ineffective monitoring, and regulatory bodies. Furthermore, the unplanned and irresponsible exploitation of resources and lack of investment results in the abundance of unskilled laborers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further added fuel to the fire and intensified the existing problems of these coal mine laborers, generally in Pakistan and particularly in District Shangla. However, the persistently marginalized coal mine laborers remained bereft of life necessities comprising health facilities and salaries. Furthermore, no health and transport facilities were dispensed to them during lockdowns.

Numerous coal mines continued to operate during the lockdown, which affected the health of many workers. Many tested positive for COVID-19 due to lack of inspection and checks by the government. While many coal mines were closed during lockdowns, mine laborers were sent home without financial compensation from the government or employers. As a result, coal mine workers vulnerabilities deepened in terms of their economic and emotional wellbeing during the pandemic. This study elaborates on the challenges faced by the coal mine laborers of district Shangla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as a result of the pandemic.

Research Objectives

To explore the challenges experienced by district Shangla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's coal mine laborers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question

What challenges were faced by district Shangla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's coal mine laborers during the global COVID-19 pandemic?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature, and primary data was collected through interviews with people associated with coal mining, observations from the field, and recorded stories. However, this study also used secondary data, including books, academic journals, reports, online blogs, and newspapers. Key Informant Interviews were conducted with coal miners from District Shangla, managerial staff working in mines, politicians, government officials, and civil society members working for labor rights. All interviews were conducted with the respondents' consent and pseudo names are not used to protect their identities. Field text was also taken from the field observations to understand the situation.

Government archives and documents were also studied and explored for studying the laws and regulations and for statistical data. In this research study, purposive and convenience sampling are used while conducting interviews with different people. The first group was the laborers, the primary actors of this research study. Thus, miners from district Shangla, tehsil Alpurai (Union Councils Lilownai, Basai, and Dherai). There are many forms of narrative research, such as autobiographies, biographies, personal accounts, oral histories, ethno-histories, ethno-biographies, auto-ethno-biographies, ethno-psychologies, and so on (Creswell, 2019).

In this research, narrative analysis is used by telling and retelling stories and personal accounts of the targeted respondent. Following this method, the researcher focused on the experiences of individuals in social and personal interactions, the chronology of experiences by focusing on the past, present, and future, first person and oral accounts, and restoring (retelling and developing the meta-story) (Creswell, 2019). It also included the coding of field texts in order to highlight intended themes or categories, as well as the incorporation of context or placement into the story. As the following figuration indicates, the narrative analysis technique considers the researcher's interaction with the participants as part of the negotiated field text. As the current research is theoretically guided by a perspective on the politics of justice and emphasizes finding/highlighting ways of oppression/exploitation of the coal mine workers, I tried to look for such themes in the narrative analysis. These stories are interlinked with the lenses used by Iris Marion Young in her discussion on the politics of justice (Creswell, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

In this research study, the model of "Oppression as a Structural Concept: Five Faces of Oppression," propounded by Iris Marion Young in 1988, is used. Young was an American political theorist and social feminist who worked on the nature of justice and social difference. She describes oppression as a product of the system. Her theory focuses on structural exploitation and oppression in a place where individuals cannot get rid of oppression by making new laws or by bringing new rules. The oppressor does not intentionally oppress the oppressed, but it is the system that makes the powerful oppress the weaker. By oppression, she means that when people reduce the potential of a few people to be fully human or make other people less human. Young describes the structural concept of oppression based on five faces of oppression in the forms of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. These tools are used interchangeably, such that one group is oppressed and exploited by another. This research, using Young's concept, will identify five forms of oppression used with coal mine laborers at different levels.

The concepts propounded by Young used in this study are exploitation, marginalization and powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Exploitation of coal mine laborers is done structurally. It is not a one person-oriented or a one policy-oriented exploitation. The whole structure (state - laws -executors) is responsible for their exploitation. The miners belong to a marginalized (poor class) community, which is the main reason for getting less attention from the policymakers. Therefore, it resulted in getting less attention among government officials in the implementation of the laws. The marginalized status of these miner laborers had kept them powerless, too. Due to powerlessness, their voices remain unheard and are easily exploited. Their powerlessness, exploitation, and marginalization have created an imperialist culture where the struggle for more production is more important than human lives. In this thirst for more production, labor is also involved as they exploit their bodies for monetary benefits and don't take care for themselves.

Coal Mine Laborers in Pakistan: An Understanding of Challenges

Coal mine laborers face insurmountable obstructions while working in mines to extract coal. However, the International Mining Act of 1923 imposes restrictions on underground mining. It reinforces dispensing appropriate accommodations for the coal mine laborers and providing canteen facilities whereby they can access food without impediment. It urges first-aid rooms and medical necessities, including ambulances, stretchers, splints, and bandages, to be accessible to coal mine laborers to mitigate unavoidable situations during an unwelcome emergency (ILO. Act, 1923). Unfortunately, the facilities in the International Mining Act 1923 are not available to the coal mine laborers of Pakistan, including basic food and health facilities, after almost one hundred years of the law.

Coal mine laborers in Pakistan are paid based on neither daily wages nor monthly salaries. The agreement is not signed between mine laborers and coal mine companies; however, it is signed on behalf of the subordinate bodies. Therefore, these companies are not directly liable to those coal mine laborers (Baloch, 2020). Based on these agreements, companies are liable for compensation to the casualties of laborers. If labor has not signed an agreement with the company and instead signed a third-party agreement, companies are not legally bound for any compensation. As the mine laborers are not appropriately registered, companies later do not provide them with the exact amount of compensation and make the registration of coal mine laborers a legal excuse (Ali, 2019). Most of these mines are not registered with the government. Mine laborers working in these mines are thus not registered and are often unable to avail the benefits (Petersen, 2020).

Both provincial and federal governments in Pakistan had drafted laws for the welfare of coal mine laborers. After the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment, mining and labor became provincial subjects. The government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa enacted the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa [Mines and Mine laborers] Act in 2017. Another act for protecting and protecting coal mines labor was passed in 2019 as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Mines Safety, Inspection and Regulation Act 2019 (Ali, 2019). After the devolution of power to provinces, there is still a lack of proper implementation of the rules and regulations by provincial governments for the protection of coal mine laborers. For example, mines are operated through informal traditional mining systems through verbal, self-made regulations made by the administrators of these coal mines. These are often compatible with Pakistan's laws for safety and protection of coal mine laborers.

Furthermore, there is also no proper documentation of these self-made regulations. Although the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Mines Safety, Inspection, and Regulation Act 2019 stipulates that every person who has completed one year of continuous service commencing from the first day of January in a coal mine shall be allowed paid leave during the subsequent 12 months and shall be granted wages on religious, government, or public holidays in addition to casual and sick leave (Ali, 2019) yet this does not take place. Coal mine laborers are paid less than laborers in other sectors. The basis for calculating their payment is also different, as their payment is based on shares in coal production. Their laborer value depends on how much coal they extract from the coal mines. Due to the utter negligence and the government's lack of interest, these vulnerable coal mine laborers are exploited continuously.

According to Glen Mpufane, Industrial Mining director, more than five hundred coal mine workers have died in these coal mines while extracting coal since 2010. Thus, industrial and coal mine associations are requesting the federal and provincial governments to implement the International Laborer Organization Convention 176 (Industriall Global Union, 2021). It is imperative to take adequate measures to stop the persistent death tolls of coal mine workers. There is an incessant demand for improving regulations and implementing the existing laws relating to the welfare of coal mine laborers. Usually, coal mine companies employ workers below the age of eighteen, who have no upper limit on work hours. Additionally, the hazardous conditions of coal mine workers and the issues as

mentioned earlier are the main reasons for chronic respiratory illness, tuberculosis, loss of eyesight, and injuries due to incidents (Pakistan, n.d.).

The COVID-19 pandemic shattered the world. However, many underdeveloped countries declared coal mining an essential industry for progress and economic development, allowing operational coal mine activities despite the stringent pandemic-induced lockdowns. In these countries, no effective precautionary measures were taken for the safety of coal mine laborers, including implementing COVID-19 SOPs in the atmosphere of coal mines (The Impact of COVID-19 on Employment in Mining, 2020). Consequently, the crowded nature of work in coal mining resulted in the vulnerability and increased exposure of coal mine laborers to COVID-19, in part due to coughing, spitting, and lung problems from exposure to coal dust, silica, and diesel exhaust (Englund, 2020)

Most countries followed the "no work, no pay" policy during COVID-19, which means the staff is not entitled to remuneration without work (Ramdo, 2020). This policy adversely affected the economic status of coal mine workers. Moreover, while COVID-19 has impacted coal mine laborers across the globe, its effects have been deeply felt by coal mine laborers in Pakistan, especially the coal mine laborers of district Shangla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Covid-19: An Analysis of Challenges Faced by the Coal Mine laborers of Shangla

This study is a Narrative analysis of the coal mine laborers of Shangla, who faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. A brief background of district Shangla of the KP province has been set forth to understand this area.

Shangla is a district of the Malakand division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Previously, a subdivision of Swat district but upgraded to district status on July 10, 1995. The district lies between 34.53 to 35.15 degrees north latitude and 72.52 to 73.00 degrees East longitude. The district is bounded north by Kohistan District, east by Battagram District and Torghar District, west by Swat District, and south by Buner District (Shangla, 2022.). According to the data of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2017 census, the district had a population of 759609(51 % male and 49% female). Among them, 386082 are male, 373508 are females, and 19 are transgender. (*District Shangla*, 2021.). In the last 19 years, the population has grown approximately 74% with a growth rate of 2.98. This district happens to occupy a place among the least developed areas of Pakistan, with a Human Development Index of 0.332(*District Shangla*, 2022.). Due to the backwardness, this area also lags behind in information source facilities. Only 85000 of the population have access to any sources of information.

Radio is a major source of information; only 2000 people still have access to the internet and computer, and about 6000 have televisions in their homes. There are 729 primary, middle, and high schools, 11 higher secondary, 05 colleges, one polytechnic, and one university campus. The literacy rate of Shangla, compared to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is too low. The literacy rate of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is 53%, while in Shangla, the rate is

33.13 percent (Education, 2022.). A vast population in Shangla has remained out of schools. They had never attained the school. Only ninety thousands of the total population is enrolled in primary school; among them, only thirty thousand have made it to secondary education. The number of female students attending school is far lower than the male students; the male literacy rate is 51.67%, while that of females is 14.50 percent. Only nine thousands of the population have attained a degree in education.

Shangla is among the backward districts of Pakistan. The poverty rate of Shangla is 53-13%, the highest among all neighboring districts (Poverty Profile, 2022.). For providing health services, there are total health facilities in Shangla are 46 of which 5 are hospitals and 19 primary health units. District Shangla has 137434 hectares of cultivated land and 96871 hectares of non-cultivated land. The area is arid agrarian, which is mostly rain-fed. The district had an exotic landscape, and houses of ancient relics from Greeks and Hinduism are also present in the region. The lush and green valleys of Shangla present a charming view for tourists. Recently, many places have been discovered as destinations for tourism, but due to lack of infrastructure, the area has not been fully developed into a tourist destination that can attract people.

According to Shangla-based journalist Khalid Khan, 80% of the population of District Shangla is associated with coal mining. Lack of opportunities, low literacy rate, and immense poverty in the area compel the inhabitants of Shangla to choose this dangerous and life-threatening coal mining job for their livelihood (Hazard, 2016). According to Shaukat Yousafzai, Labor and Culture Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 70% of Shangla youth work in coal mines (The Nation, 2021). Due to geographical proximity and language connectivity, most miners worked in Kohat and Orakzai districts. However, some chose to work in far-flung areas of Baluchistan for more money. On March 12, 2021, eight miners belonging to district Shangla were trapped inside a coal mine in Marwar, Baluchistan. They were 1000 feet below the ground when a methane gas exploded in the mine. Six mine laborers were killed, and only two were rescued (Reuters, 2021). It is believed that half of the local graveyards in Shangla are coal mine workers' graves. On average, this area receives three to six dead bodies every month from different coal mines (DailyTimes, 2020). Last year, 93 of the 186 coal miners died in different coal mines across the country, and they all belonged to district Shangla (PMWF, 2020).

Like other economic sectors, the coal mining industry has also been badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The stringent and non-conducive working environment has exposed workers to dangerous health risks (Ramdoo, 2020). Many health and safety workplace issues arise due to private sector management not conforming to the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Consequently, coal mine workers relentlessly faced life-threatening risks while already being the most vulnerable and disadvantageous class of the industrial sector worldwide in general and in Pakistan in particular (Shahani, 2020).

Ministry of Planning steered the debate and stated that about 12.3 million to 18.5 million Pakistani employment had poorly been disturbed by the severe shocks of the coronavirus outbreak. Similarly, according to laborer unions, 75% of 65 million workforces are informal, unregistered laborers with no social security or legal cover (Latif, 2020). These unregistered informal workforces were severely affected by COVID-19 in terms of health and economy. There is a lack of adequate and proper mechanisms for addressing the issues of these laborers. It is dismal that even the government has not announced any compensation packages for the vast portion of the unregistered informal workforce that has contributed to the country's economic growth. Unfortunately, the absence of workforce registration has deprived them of their salaries.

COVID-19 has affected every aspect of society; however, the lives of laborers have been badly affected due to their pre-existing vulnerability, financial pressures, and conditions. In this context, approximately 80% of the disadvantaged district Shangla population is associated with the coal mining workforce to earn their daily livelihood. Unfortunately, the pandemic-induced lockdowns and strict SOP implementation created more challenges for coal mine laborers, adversely impacting their daily livelihood. The steady rise in COVID cases in March 2020 compelled the government to impose complete lockdowns nationwide. As a result, many laborers across the country were stuck in their workplace environments (Shafiq, 2021).

Similarly, coal mines are primarily situated in hilly areas, which are usually far away from markets and the jurisdiction of villages. Due to lockdowns, markets were closed, and there was no alternative for laborers to get food and other essential items. In addition, they were short of rations and food items at their mining sites. Muhammad Gull said:

First, we were unaware of the developments taking place due to the Covid-19 outbreak. We entered the mines before sunrise and came out after evening. We were in the complete dark about state affairs. Initially, we were not aware of the lockdown and COVID-19 outbreak, but when our friends went to markets to bring daily food items, they came to know that due to COVID-19, the government had imposed a lockdown. However, it created panic among the laborers despite our busy work in the coal mines. In the subsequent days, industries were closed down due to lockdowns, so we were prevented from coal extraction. Thus, we spent a couple of weeks in our shelters at mining sites and then moved toward our home. (Gul, personal communication, 2021)

The imposition of pandemic-induced lockdowns adversely impacted the people connected to informal jobs, including coal mining. Moreover, informally employed workers are dependent on their daily work and earnings. Unfortunately, they were deprived of their daily earnings when the industries were closed. Coal mine laborers and their contractors/companies developed their self-made payment model according to the employees' pay. However, the employees working in these coal mines are paid based on shares in coal production, measured in tons, or paid for the length of cuttings they do during the coal extraction. However, they are entitled to wages for their work, and if no work or production is done, they get nothing regarding salaries (Shafi, 2021). They are not paid

daily. These payments are made every second or fourth Friday of the month, termed "Jumawar Heesab." Companies or contractors pay their money to the mate, i.e., the leader of a group of laborers. His work is to keep a record of the laborer's work.

All agreements about the rate per ton extraction of coal are decided between the mate and the laborers. These agreements are primarily verbal and informal. The mate receives money from the company per coal production. He takes his share and distributes the remaining amount among the laborers according to their work. The pandemic-induced lockdowns resulted in the closing of different industries, including coal mining, due to which demand for coal in the market decreased, resulting in companies and contractors being unable to pay their employees. Further work was also stopped at the mining sites due to the massive stock of coal and lack of market demand, creating financial problems for Shangla's coal mine laborers working in coal mines across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Qasim Khan, a mine worker, said:

We belong to low-income families, and we had left our children and families at home and earned for them in these coal mines so that they could eat two meals a day. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdown was imposed throughout the country, which affected us and our families. We were not paid due to the closure of coal mines and were stuck at the mining sites. We did not even have money to fulfill our daily expenses. Consequently, we borrowed money from other friends and hired higher-priced taxis to reach home. Staying at mines was becoming a financial burden for us. (Khan, personal communication, 2021).

Moreover, the coal mine laborers of the district Shangla decided to move back to their homes after the imposition of lockdowns. Subsequently, no work or other facilities were provided to them; thus, they haplessly reached their homes due to the absence of compensation packages from the government and coalmine owners. In tandem, the coal mine laborers of Shangla who worked in different coal mines in Pakistan were deprived of medical facilities and access to doctors. Zahid said:

Coal mine laborers faced many hurdles moving toward their homes. Due to lockdowns, public transport, including inter and intra city, was suspended and, therefore, they hired private taxis and paid them high fares. Furthermore, the coal mine workforce was investigated at the different entrances, and those traveling from other districts were isolated in quarantine centers when they were entering their home district, Shangla. Due to the fear of imposed quarantine, many laborers avoided traveling by vehicle toward their hometown, Shangla. (Zahid, personal communication, 2021).

Similarly, they traveled by foot from Swat onward, crossing mountains, a demanding track that takes more than eight hours. They reached their homes by traveling through these arduous paths. Most of them were later reported by locals, resulting in the administration taking them from their homes to quarantine centers. The main issue was in understanding the outbreak of COVID-19. They were unaware of the nature of the virus and how risky their meeting with family members would be for their health, which was one of the main reasons for the rise in COVID-19 cases in district Shangla. Most cases remained unreported and were kept secret from government administration (Ali, 2021).

One of the mine laborers, Khalid Khan, shared his story about the challenges he faced during his travel back home:

The coal mine laborer owner closed the mines due to a government-imposed lockdown to prevent COVID-19 cases. We had no other option but to travel back to our home. We hired private taxis to reach our destination because public transport was suspended. Upon reaching the different points of our hometown district, Shangla, we were stopped, including at Shangla Top. Against this backdrop, we were brought to the quarantine centers, and they took our tests and kept us for a few days in the quarantine center. After a few days, the coalmine workforce was informed that their tests were negative and allowed them to go to their homes. Frighteningly, when other coal mine laborers heard about the quarantine upon reaching their hometown Shangla, they opted to travel through the side of the mountain by their feet to avoid the imposed quarantine. However, many of them were brought to the quarantine centers due to their traveling history and the complaints of local people. (Khan, personal communication, 2021).

The hardships of coal mine laborers increased upon reaching their homes following the nationwide lockdowns. They did not earn in the last days they spent in the coal mines; neither were they paid for their previous work. They were in a financial crisis due to the prolonged lockdowns. Talha said:

Due to lockdowns, mines were shut down, and we had no access to other jobs. In addition, our family's survival is dependent on my earnings. However, due to a lack of access to earnings, I borrowed money from friends and relatives to meet my family's expenditures. As the coal mines became operational, I returned to coal mines for work. I desperately needed money; therefore, I did not wait for the government's decisions. Thus, I am working day and night to pay back the debts and to fulfill my family's expenditures" (Talha, personal communication, 2021).

Unfortunately, asthma, tuberculosis, and lung disease are prevalent among coal mine laborers due to inhaling deadly dust from coal drilling. Patients who worked in coal mines and patients with breathing problems were kept under special observation (Ali, 2021). Unfortunately, COVID-19 has further aggravated their already vulnerable health conditions. The patients with lung problems who were connected to coal mining became easily exposed to the consequences of the outbreak of COVID-19. Lack of education and awareness were other significant factors that put them and their families' at risk. They were not taking COVID-19 seriously and did not follow the SOPs. They did not take government measures seriously and went directly to their homes without isolating themselves in quarantine centers (Khan, 2021). This led to the spread of COVID-19 in their families and nearby areas. Those who showed symptoms were not reported to government officials. They were treated in their homes with home remedies.

The problems and challenges faced by coal mine laborers did not stop following the relaxation of lockdowns. The lockdown relaxation and opening of coal mines created further complications for these laborers. As the lockdown was released and normalized, these coal mine laborers rushed toward their working sites. Similarly, they spent much time during lockdown without work and took loans to run their home affairs. Moreover, they

worked hard to earn money to repay their debts and support their families (Kamal, 2021). Under the order of the National Command and Operational Center (NCOC), all these mines became operational under the conditions of complying with SOPs. Life is seemingly dangerous at mine sites compared to everyday life because no one follows the SOPs inside or outside the coal mines. Mr. Akhlaq said:

No one asked about our health history when we returned to work after the lockdowns. We were allowed to work without any health investigation. No one follows the government's instructions and SOPs. The coal mines are not extended where we can practice social distancing. We need to work together; we cannot work separately while working in coal mines; therefore, maintaining social distance is difficult...Moreover, wearing a mask was necessary even before COVID-19 to protect ourselves from coal dust, but no one wore it because of the high temperature and low oxygen level inside the coal mines. Wearing masks while working in coal mines creates breathing problems for us. (Akhlaq, personal communication, 2021).

Neither the coalmine administration nor the coal mine laborers are serious about implementing COVID-19 SOPs in these coal mining sites, creating health complications for mine laborers. No special steps from a health perspective were taken for the workforce in the coal mines, even during the outbreak of COVID-19. There was neither a doctor nor any dispenser available to the workforce of the coal mine. No routine checkups were conducted to identify potential COVID-19-affected workers, nor is there a place for quarantining suspected COVID-19 patients (Khan, 2021). Moreover, government officials are not taking steps to comply with the coal mine owners to implement the laws and COVID-19 preventive measures. They did not regularly visit the coal mine sites or inspect the coal mines properly. Zahid Khan said: "The coal mine inspectors and government officials did not pay a visit regularly to check the coal mines while they implement the COVID-19 SOPs. They rarely visit, for instance, once in a month or two" (Khan, personal communication, 2021).

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has impacted the lives of individuals from every walk of life and created mayhem worldwide. The subversive outbreak of this pandemic has led to enormous losses in terms of the economy and the irreparable loss of precious lives. The outbreak is still prevalent and has not yet capsized. Every day, people are still losing the battle against COVID-19. All over the world, countries are vaccinating their citizens to decrease the threat of a global pandemic; however, its re-emergence in new phases and variants is frightening for people across the globe.

Similarly, different countries have taken different initiatives and adopted strategies to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, imposing different levels of lockdowns, including smart and complete lockdowns. The imposition of lockdowns adversely impacted economic growth worldwide, subsequently affecting everyday life. Consequently, the lives of informal laborers have been starkly affected – the situation was incredibly bleak in developing countries. In these countries, neither earnest nor adequate

health facilities nor financial security are available, nor is there any emergency benefit system through which the problems of persistently vulnerable people could be addressed.

In Pakistan, the laborer class was severely affected by this outbreak, and among them, coal mine laborers were the ones who had suffered incalculably compared to other walks of life. Unfortunately, coal mine laborers lived a miserable life even before the outbreak of COVID-19; however, the pandemic has further intensified their miseries and deprivation. Most of the coal mine laborers belong to district Shangla of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the least developed area where inequalities are still intact compared to other parts of the province. The people of this deprived region are screaming for attention towards development and progress. However, people live toilsome lives and face hardships while working in coal mines across the country. The COVID-19 outbreak further escalated the troubles and challenges of the coal mine laborers of district Shangla. These coal mine workers faced insurmountable economic pressures and challenges and were exposed to health problems during the different phases of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Additionally, they were held captive at mine sites due to the sudden implementation of lockdowns; and, consequentially, no facilities were provided to them at these sites. Thus, they were ignored both by coal mine owners and the government. They faced hardships while returning to their homes after implementing nationwide lockdowns. In tandem, these coal mine laborers of district Shangla were financially vulnerable. Their household expenditures were typically fulfilled through their daily earnings. Thus, they became bankrupt due to the closure of coal mines after the imposition of lockdown, and, hence, they remained without earning for a long time. Due to sudden lockdowns, they were deprived of their remuneration by the coal mine owners.

Moreover, they were deprived of their jobs and took loans to meet their family expenses. Asthma and lung diseases are prevalent in coal mine workers due to coal mine dust, making them vulnerable and exposing them to COVID-19. Thus, it is critical that the government take earnest measures to provide a conducive environment to the vast portion of informal laborers that contribute to the economic growth and development of the country. Effective plans should be constructed and implemented to benefit informal laborers amidst unprecedented situations such as COVID-19. Similarly, the coal mine owners should be forced to comply with the mechanisms implemented for informal laborers in the future. This, in turn, will have a range of spillover benefits not only for the informal laborers but also for Pakistan's development, progress, and economic growth.

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