

## **Review Article**

### **COVID -19 PANDEMIC- CHALLENGES IN PAKISTAN**

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Pakistan has witnessed a huge increase in Corona cases, with the total tallying to two hundred thirty thousand since the onset of the pandemic with the initial two confirmed cases on February 26, 2020. The fatalities related to it has reached to 4304 (3.3%) in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

The pandemic has caused a strain on the public health systems and economies worldwide. Pakistan being a developing country, also has to face a lot of challenges during this Covid-19 pandemic.

#### **Lack of Health care facilities:**

In Pakistan, for every 10,000 people, there are only 9.8 physicians, five nurses, and only six hospital beds. The country spends only 2.8 percent of its GDP on health. On the contrary, the developed countries have, on average, 55 hospital beds, over 30 physicians, and 81 nurses per 10,000 people. In the context of Covid-19, Pakistan possesses only 0.32 ICU beds per 100,000 people and 1 ventilator per 100,000 people. This data reflects on the level of the threat these pandemic poses to deal with the needs of 200 million people in Pakistan.<sup>2,3</sup>

#### **The Economic downturn**

With no obvious way to increase the capacity of the health care system, the only alternative to prevent the spread of viruses is preventive measures such as social distancing, mass testing, lockdown, and quarantining. The lockdown and consequent interruptions in supply chains have a negative impact on the economy and society, particularly the poor. The shutdown measures have affected small and medium enterprises and daily wagers.

The GDP of the country has shrunk to 0.38%. According to a report, this pandemic can result in an estimated 3 million being unemployed, and the poverty rate can surge to 33.5%.<sup>3-7</sup>

#### **Urbanized cities and Rural Areas - Averting a spillover**

In Pakistan, 65 % population is rural-based, whereas 35 % population dwells in urban areas. The main cities, like Karachi and Lahore, have seen the main thrust of the coronavirus. These cities are heavily urbanized with the huge population residing in small residential units makes it impossible to have potent social distancing to prevent viral spread. Consequently, the health care system has been pushed to the brink as almost all hospitals and facilities have been filled to their capacities. In such a situation, if the rural population also gets infected in the same manner, the consequences could be disastrous. Another challenge regarding the containment of viruses is the level of awareness, especially in rural areas. Since most of the people are not literate and don't have access to high-speed Internet or media, it is difficult to enforce safety SOPs in rural areas.<sup>8,9</sup>

#### **Social & Cultural factors**

The social, cultural, religious beliefs, and lack of confidence in government and institutions are also major hurdles to deal with the pandemic. Shaking hands and hugging are deeply entrenched in our culture. The folks consider Covid-19 a conspiracy being made against their way of life.<sup>10,11</sup>

#### **COVID 19 & Social stigma**

Another challenge, Pakistan is facing in dealing with COVID 19, is the social stigma associated with it and its impacts. The reason for the stigma associated that not

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much is known about it as it is a new disease is causing fear and confusion among the public. The stigma has driven people to hide illness, preventing them from getting tested, quarantined and seek medical care.<sup>11</sup>

### **Illiteracy, Inequality, and poverty**

Illiteracy, Inequality, and poverty are also major challenges to combat COVID 19 pandemic in developing countries like Pakistan. Providing and enforcing the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) to a large population is challenging. The poor are at high risk of getting affected due to a compromised immune system and unequal access to health care facilities. Moreover, lockdown implemented in other countries was not readily acceptable to daily wagers as well as to the business community due to poor economy.<sup>10</sup>

### **Lack of Coordination between different levels of government**

The lack of coordination between federal and provincial governments has been detrimental to the country in its fight against corona. This gives a negative image to the common man that policymakers themselves are ambiguous in their goals in combating pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Infodemic**

The COVID-19 has created a situation of high uncertainty creating a propaganda spectrum on electronic, print, and social media. This misinformation and disinformation both collectively form an infodemic part of the pandemic. The competitive environment has created compromises in the verification of factual information resulting in more anxiety and depression among the public in general.<sup>10, 11</sup>

### **Technology Tracking Testing**

Pakistan does not possess the technology which could effectively counter the spread of the virus as it has been deployed by developed countries. China effectively used Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) for tracking potential coronavirus carriers.

Moreover, cloud-based Coronavirus diagnostic tool has been used by some countries to detect a virus in less than 20 seconds.<sup>12</sup>

Although Pakistan is a nuclear state but lacks expertise, facilities for mass testing and infrastructure like high speed broadband network for gathering real time information to effectively control disease.

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RS: Conception of Idea and study design

RD: Data collection and drafting article

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