

NAVIGATING HARDSHIPS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PAIN, STRUGGLE, AND SURVIVAL OF DAILY WAGERS IN KASHMIR AMID CATASTROPHES

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ABSTRACT

Catastrophes like the Covid-19 pandemic and its subsequent stringent lockdown have profoundly impacted individuals worldwide, with India notably affected. Regarded as one of the most significant natural disasters in history, the pandemic prompted numerous countries, including India, to implement lockdown measures to mitigate the spread of the deadly infection. However, the aftermath has revealed an economic crisis across both organized and unorganized sectors, severely affecting the means of livelihood. Daily wage earners were among those most severely affected. Against this backdrop, this study endeavors to explore the lived experiences of daily wage workers amidst the Covid-19 lockdown in rural Kashmir. It focuses on understanding how the lockdown disrupted their lives and livelihoods. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the research aims to grasp the essence of the participants' lived experiences in-depth. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 14 participants (aged 36 - 52), including two females. The findings reveal the severe challenges faced by daily wage workers during the lockdown, including hunger and other hardships. The repercussions extend beyond physical health, including job loss, heightened anxiety, increased interpersonal conflicts, and incidents of child abuse, thus exacerbating the distressing circumstances faced by this vulnerable population. This study highlights the urgent need for targeted relief programs and robust social safety nets to support daily wage workers during crises. Integrating economic aid with mental health support and educational resources is crucial to addressing the multilayered impacts of such crises on marginalized groups. Focusing on the intersection of economic instability, mental stress, family violence, and educational disruption, it underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to address these complex challenges and mitigate the adverse effects on marginalized sections of society.

KEYWORDS: Poverty, catastrophes, household consumption, mental stress, family violence, child labor

RESUMEN: *Sobrevivir la adversidad: un estudio fenomenológico sobre el dolor, los desafíos, y la supervivencia de los trabajadores en Cachemira en tiempos de catástrofe*

Catástrofes como la pandemia de la Covid-19 y las estrictas medidas de confinamiento que la siguieron han tenido un impacto devastador en la vida de millones de personas en todo el mundo, India siendo uno de los países más gravemente afectados. Considerada como una de las catástrofes naturales más

graves de la historia, la pandemia obligó a muchos países, incluida India, a implementar medidas de confinamiento para frenar la propagación del virus. Sin embargo, estas medidas causaron una crisis económica en sectores tanto formalizados como no, poniendo en peligro los recursos de subsistencia. Entre los más perjudicados se encontraban los jornaleros. Este estudio explora las experiencias de estos trabajadores en las zonas rurales de Cachemira durante el confinamiento para entender el impacto de la pandemia y posterior confinamiento en las vidas de estos individuos. A través de un enfoque fenomenológico, se busca comprender las experiencias vitales de los participantes en profundidad. Se realizaron entrevistas presenciales con 14 participantes con edades de entre 36 a 52 años, incluidas dos mujeres. Los resultados revelan que la época de confinamiento más estricto les trajo enormes retos a los jornaleros, incluyendo hambre y otras dificultades. Las consecuencias no se limitaron a la salud física, ya que incluyeron pérdidas de empleo, aumento de la ansiedad, conflictos interpersonales e incluso abuso infantil, que se sumaron a las duras circunstancias que enfrentaba esta vulnerable población. Este estudio recalca la urgente necesidad de implementar programas de ayuda específicos y redes de seguridad social robustas para proteger a los jornaleros en tiempos de crisis. Destaca también la importancia de combinar la asistencia económica con el apoyo a la salud mental, además del acceso a la educación para abordar los diversos efectos de los confinamientos en las comunidades marginadas. Este estudio proporciona un examen minucioso de la combinación de dificultades a las que se enfrentaron los jornaleros de Cachemira durante de catástrofe de la Covid-19, recalcando no sólo su impacto económico y físico más inmediato, sino repercusiones psicológicas y sociales más profundas. A través de un análisis de la intersección entre la inestabilidad económica, las presiones mentales, la violencia familiar y la interrupción de la educación, esta investigación revela la urgente necesidad de llevar a cabo estrategias de intervención específicas dirigidas a disminuir estos efectos adversos en las poblaciones más vulnerables.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Pobreza, catástrofes, consumo doméstico, presión mental, violencia familiar, trabajo infantil

Introduction

Catastrophes are calamitous events that cause widespread destruction and suffering. These include exceptional events such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, flu outbreaks, wars, genocide, famines, and pandemics which dramatically overturn the world and the lives of people (Dole et al., 2016). Amid such catastrophes, marginalized groups face numerous challenges due to their dependence on day-to-day earnings, lack of job security, financial instability, and limited access to resources (Blaikie et al., 1994). Subsequently, their lack of access to benefits such as paid sick leave, unemployment insurance, life and health insurance, and pension benefits intensifies vulnerabilities. They frequently encounter barriers to accessing emergency services and disaster relief due to a lack of transportation, resources, and support systems, making their lives more difficult. Daily wage workers, often part of marginalized groups, face severe problems during catastrophes that abruptly halt their ability to earn a living (Tanzi, 2022). They are economically insecure, particularly during catastrophes, due to the lack of formal job policies and protections that govern their employment. Moreover, these workers often face irregular incomes, with no guaranteed hours or job security, leaving them disproportionately vulnerable during catastrophes (Albiston & Fisk, 2021). Their livelihood depends on the availability of daily work, but during catastrophes and economic downturns, their vulnerability is starkly exposed, and they struggle to access emergency resources and

basic needs. In the aftermath of such disasters, they often struggle with immediate income loss, as their work is disrupted or entirely unavailable. Furthermore, during public health crises like pandemics, poor labourers may experience heightened vulnerabilities due to the inability to work safely or access healthcare, further compounding their financial instability (Côté et al., 2021). The lack of job security, inadequate savings, and minimal access to social safety nets exacerbate their difficulties, making recovery from any disaster significantly more challenging. Covid-19 emerged as a catastrophe that disrupted institutions and ways of life, leaving no clear continuities (Horton, 2021). This catastrophe increased the deadly virus and to curb this, many countries implemented precarious measures such as lockdowns, to protect people. However, the repercussions of the lockdown were profound, affecting every aspect of life in India. When any catastrophe or disaster strikes, daily-wage earners often experience an immediate loss of income as they are unable to work, resulting in a starved life (Green, 2000). Moreover, economic instability, coupled with increased exposure to unsafe working conditions, further compounds their difficulties. Therefore, economic instability, widespread job loss, and disruptions to education have been prominent consequences (Blustein & Guarino, 2020). The major objective of the lockdown was to curb the virus, but unfortunately, it had negative consequences: all markets and business hubs were closed, halting the national economies. Millions of workers lost their jobs. Moreover, the government focused on the physical components of men and women and ignored their psychological difficulties. Another unfavorable consequence of the lockdown was that migrant workers walked hundreds of miles to reach their homes, they slept without food on the roads, and many died due to the non-availability of food and medicines. Many of them did not benefit from the government's relief package because it did not have a proper distribution plan. Thus, the government failed to provide relief among daily wagers (Singh et al., 2020). Additionally, the catastrophe underscored existing social inequalities, exacerbating disparities in healthcare access and outcomes. It also reflected the economic catastrophe as the lockdown disrupted employment opportunities for daily wage workers across organized and unorganized sectors, which affected their livelihood. In the initial days of the lockdown, the daily wage workers survived on the livelihood of their savings. After spending their savings, they started borrowing money from friends, relatives, and neighbors to fulfill their basic needs. As the extension of the lockdown generated non-availability of work, they became engulfed in poverty. In this scenario, daily wage workers experienced psychological tensions and family conflicts because they were unable to meet their family members' basic needs. According to the International Labour Organization report (2020) in India, lockdown pushed 40 million workers into abject poverty.

Moreover, daily wagers face a precarious existence, marked by uncertainty, insecurity, and vulnerability (Armano et al., 2017). Their lives are characterized by irregular income, long working hours, and limited access to social benefits, leaving them perpetually struggling to make ends meet. The constant search for work, exploitation by employers, and lack of job security evoke feelings of anxiety, stress, and hopelessness. Social stigma, marginalization, and limited social mobility exacerbate their emotional turmoil (Smith, 2015). Despite resilience and resourcefulness, they often lack access to basic amenities, healthcare, and education, compromising their well-being and dignity. Their aspirations for stable employment, financial security, and improved living conditions remain uncertain (Whitehead, & Kabeer, 2001). Therefore, the living conditions of poor people significantly deteriorated during this catastrophe due to resource depletion, further exacerbating their struggle for survival. Moreover, their livelihood in Kashmir is perpetually vulnerable to catastrophic disruptions, exacerbating their existing struggles. Natural calamities, such as earthquakes and floods,

including the Covid-19 catastrophe severely affected their survival. The Covid-19 pandemic compounded their struggles, with lockdowns and economic shutdowns rendering many jobless and without access to necessities. The absence of social security nets, savings, or alternative income sources left them acutely susceptible to poverty, hunger, and destitution. In the aftermath of the pandemic, they also employed coping mechanisms such as informal lending, asset depletion, and reduced consumption. However, these strategies often perpetuate debt traps and further entrench poverty. Therefore, with limited access to social security benefits, savings, or alternative income sources, these workers have struggled to meet necessities, including food, healthcare, and shelter. Furthermore, the pandemic's disruption of supply chains and commerce has led to reduced economic activity, diminishing the already scarce job opportunities available to poor daily earners.

Aim of the study

The study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the lived experiences of daily wage workers, a marginalized segment of society, during times of crisis, specifically in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measures severely impacted the livelihoods of daily wage workers in Kashmir. Furthermore, the study seeks to elucidate the multifaceted challenges faced by these workers, encompassing economic hardships and social issues, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of their plight during such catastrophic events.

Fig 1: Map of Kashmir Division having district boundaries



Source: Chief Electoral Officer, UT of J&K,
Retrieved from <https://www.ceojk.nic.in/JKMaps/KASHMIR%20DIVISION.pdf>

Methodological Stance:**Approach and Participant Selection**

In this study, we used a phenomenological approach to explore the life of daily wagers in the Covid-19 lockdown. Phenomenology helps us understand the meaning of people's lived experiences. The phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. In other words, it focuses on describing a phenomenon that all the participants have experienced. One key aspect of the phenomenological approach is that it assumes that there is an essence to a shared experience. In a phenomenological study, Eichelberger (1989) asserts the need to analyze the experience to identify the basic elements common to members of a specific group.

Initially, 22 potential participants were approached, but only 14 consented to take part in the study. The study used a purposive sampling technique, where participants were selected based on specific criteria deemed important by the researchers. This sampling method focused on identifying individuals who could provide rich, relevant insights into the topic. The criteria for selection were: a) daily wage earners b) residents of Kashmir (Fig.1) c) affected by Covid-19 and d) willingness to participate. The collection of data continued until data saturation had been reached, which is the point at which no new information was emerging from additional interviews. After conducting 12 interviews, data saturation had been achieved. However, to ensure comprehensive coverage and avoid missing any pertinent information, two additional participants were recruited, bringing the total number of interviews to 14, of which 12 were males and 2 were females. The selection of only two female participants was primarily due to the limited presence of females in dailywage labor, which limited their representation in the target population. It simultaneously reflects the sociocultural reality in Kashmir, where women are rarely involved in daily wagemlabor or similar activities. The socio-demographic details of the participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of the participants

S. No.	Gender	Age	Family Members	Monthly income	
				Before lockdown	During lockdown
P1	Male	42	5	8000-9000	Nil
P2	Male	39	4	8000	1500
P3	Male	40	6	7000 – 9000	Nil
P4	Male	38	7	10000 -11000	2000
P5	Male	33	6	9000	200
P6	Male	41	5	10000 – 11000	Nil
P7	Male	44	7	11000	1000
P8	Male	36	5	7000 – 9000	Nil
P9	Male	48	7	8000	2500
P10	Male	42	6	7000 – 8000	Nil
P11	Male	50	5	9000	Nil
P12	Male	48	6	8000	Nil
P13	Female	43	5	3000	Nil
P14	Female	40	3	2500	Nil

Procedure and Analysis

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out with all 14 participants. Interviews were scheduled at times that were convenient for the participants and conducted in the local Kashmiri language to ensure comfort, ease of expression, and clarity. The interview questions were open-ended and designed to avoid technical jargon, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions. With the participants' consent, all interviews, lasting between 45 and 75 minutes, were audio-recorded. The analysis of the interview data followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, including the steps viz. a) becoming familiar with the data b) generating initial codes to organize and structure the data c) identifying and reviewing primary themes d) defining and naming themes and e) reporting the results.

Ethical Issues

When researchers approached the participants, they did not give their consent instantly. After being informed of the study's aims, the participants agreed to participate in the project without any force or pressure. The interview process was carried out between lunch and tea breaks so that the research did not interfere with their work. The interview process was carried out in the local language (Kashmiri) to get the exact data. The personal details including names of the participants were kept confidential. The informed consent taken by the participants was about the sensitive nature of their economic and personal struggles amidst vulnerable socioeconomic status. Furthermore, to maintain confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymized and their narratives were presented using numbers or pseudonyms.

Results and Discussions

After analyzing the data and after thoughtful consideration of the set aim, the following six themes were generated, which are elaborated as follows:

Job Loss

Catastrophes trigger massive job loss, exacerbating economic instability and human suffering (Zeckhauser, 1996). Job loss among daily earners in catastrophes has devastating and long-lasting consequences, pushing them into financial uncertainty and insecurity. Catastrophes increase economic crises, health emergencies, environmental disasters, and the sudden destruction of the livelihood of lower-income groups, leaving millions of individuals starved. Vulnerable groups, such as daily wagers, small business owners, informal sector workers, low-skilled workers, women, and minority groups, were disproportionately affected. For the study participants, Covid-19 emerged as a deadly catastrophe because it made their lives very harsh and difficult. The lockdown resulted in a significant fall in income and employment throughout India (Bertrand et al, 2020). According to the ILO report (2020), the catastrophe had a detrimental impact on the world of work in terms of reduced working hours and employment losses. Furthermore, around 10 million people lost their jobs worldwide because of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. And around 97 percent of household incomes have declined since the start of the pandemic. Millions of workers around the world were barely living and had no savings or access to credit, resulting in no income, no food, no security, and no future. One of the participants shared his experiences (P1):

I worked as a daily wager before the lockdown. My family survived happily, but due to the job loss caused by the lockdown, which came as a major shock to me and my family because there

was no work available, we endured a life of starvation for several days. Honestly speaking, I could not buy necessities due to the lack of money, which resulted in pain, stress, and hunger.

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted economies, and destroyed supply chains and markets, resulting in widespread job loss. The consequences of job losses are loss of income, food insecurity, increased poverty, reduced access to healthcare, and increased psychological trauma. The sudden loss of livelihood deprives them of their sole source of income, making it challenging to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Without social safety nets or unemployment benefits, the participants were forced to rely on meager savings, informal lending, or charitable assistance. This situation exacerbates emotional distress, anxiety, and decreased self-esteem, straining family relationships and social networks. The informal nature of their work leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, with limited access to labor protections or collective bargaining. Moreover, job loss in the family was associated with greater food insecurity. In this study, respondents reported that, due to the Covid-19 lockdown, it was hard for them to find a job to fulfill the basic needs of their families. The lockdown's sudden economic disruption rendered nearly 120 million people in India jobless, including daily wage laborers, small shop owners, and migrants (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, 2020). Around the world, the effects of the catastrophe pandemic were not only limited to health, they also had negative implications for socioeconomic aspects. One of the participants (P2) reported:

I was selling fruits and vegetables in the market daily to fulfill the basic needs of life. However, the lockdown made our lives miserable; we endured a traumatic life because my workplace was closed, and I had no other source of income. I took debt from a neighbor to survive, and once the debt money was exhausted, I sold my property to meet my family's basic needs.

In desperation, some may turn to low-paying or hazardous work, perpetuating cycles of poverty due to job loss.

Poverty

Catastrophes exacerbate poverty, unleashing devastating and long-lasting consequences on vulnerable populations. Limited access to necessities like food, water, shelter, and healthcare worsens existing socio-economic disparities. These groups are much affected by catastrophes because they face heightened risks of hunger, malnutrition, homelessness, and disease. The aftermath of catastrophes often perpetuates poverty, undermining economic growth, social cohesion, and human dignity. Moreover, Covid-19 pandemic intensifies poverty's grip, ravaging vulnerable sections of society and increasing economic hardships. The suspension of economic and business activities during the crisis pushed millions of people into poverty. The closure of the labor market severely impacted daily earners, effectively halting their income. One of the participants (P7) narrated:

During the lockdown, I lost my job and endured a life of starvation due to the lack of work. I spent all my savings on medicines, and now I have nothing left to spend. Now, in dire poverty, it feels better to die from the coronavirus than to continue living in poverty.

In the Covid-19 pandemic poor people were trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, struggling to survive on meager earnings. Their informal and unstable employment left them vulnerable to exploitation, with limited access to social benefits, education, and healthcare. Low wages, irregular income, and lack of job security forced them to live hand-to-mouth, making ends meet

a constant challenge (Smith & McBride, 2023). The International Labour Organization predicted that the Covid-19 pandemic pushed around 400 million workers from India's informal sector into poverty (ILO 2020). One of the participants (P8) expressed:

Before the lockdown, we used to live a happy life, but unfortunately, the lockdown turned our happiness into mourning. In the early days of the lockdown, I fulfilled my family's basic needs with my wife's savings, but once they were exhausted, we fell into severe poverty. No one paid attention to us, and our lives felt like hell.

The cyclical nature of poverty perpetuates their vulnerability, as limited education and skills reduce employment opportunities, further entrenching poverty (Joy et al., 2024). The daily wager's precarious existence was marked by uncertainty, insecurity, and hopelessness, underscoring the urgent need for policy interventions, social protections, and economic empowerment to break this cycle of poverty.

Child Labour

Participants in this study faced various hardships and one of the hardships that drastically affected their lives, was when they sent their children to work (emergence of child labor). Child labor was a heartbreaking reality for many participants, who were forced to send their children to work due to economic desperation. Amid this, their children were deprived of education and were vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Moreover, school closures forced many poor students into human slavery, exploitation, and hazardous jobs (Habib et al., 2024). The study reveals that many children also found themselves forced into agricultural and domestic work. One of the participants (P9) articulated:

Due to the financial crunch during the pandemic, I urged my child to work alongside me so that we could have an additional source of income and survive for a longer period. However, this severely affected his education.

However, it was not limited to helping their family as this brought new horrors to them because they forgot how to read and write and had difficulty with the basic framing of sentences. Meager earnings and irregular employment left families reliant on their children's income, perpetuating cycles of poverty. During the catastrophes, child labor usually surges as families struggle to survive. Many families turn to child labor as a coping mechanism during times of crisis, and as poverty escalates, schools close, and social services become scarce, more children find themselves forced into the workforce (UNICEF, 2020a). One of the participants (P10) stated:

There was a huge financial crunch in our family because the government suddenly announced the lockdown and imposed strict restrictions on economic activities, which made our lives even more difficult than a pandemic. In the middle of the lockdown, I found work near a neighboring village, where two laborers were needed. I took this job along with my child to ensure our survival for a few more days.

According to UNICEF (2020b), more than 1.5 billion children missed out on their schooling due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions.

Mental stress

During catastrophes, mental stress escalates to alarming levels, threatening the psychological well-being of affected populations. The trauma of displacement, loss of loved ones, and destruction of livelihoods trigger anxiety, and depression (Seguin et al., 2016). Vulnerable groups, such as children, women, and the elderly including the participants, face heightened risks of emotional distress. The breakdown of social support networks and community structures exacerbates feelings of isolation and despair. In this unprecedented situation, people suffered ruthlessly and witnessed many psychological problems, in terms of mental health, including stress, anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty, which emerged gradually. One of the participants (P3) narrated:

During the lockdown, we endured a life of pain, and as the head of the family, I encountered numerous challenges. As we all know, money is crucial for leading a better life.

They faced immense mental stress, fueled by the precarious nature of their employment and the constant struggle to make ends meet. The physical toll of manual labor, lack of access to healthcare, and poor working conditions exacerbated their emotional distress. The weight of responsibility, lack of control over their lives, and limited social support networks compounded their stress, often leading to depression, anxiety disorders, and other mental health issues. As a result, the daily wagers' mental well-being suffered, impacting their relationships and overall quality of life. The catastrophe also hit the national economy which directly affected them, and they suffered ruthlessly. One of the participants (P4) narrated:

The lockdown made our lives unbearable and filled with stress as I was unable to provide for my family's basic needs, which significantly heightened my anxiety. Being jobless and without any other source of income only worsened the situation. During the pandemic, I was unable to buy medicines for my wife. I have five daughters, and the financial crunch prevented me from meeting their basic needs. This created an atmosphere of stress, anxiety, and fear within our home.

The pandemic exposed people to an alarming risk of incurable diseases, as well as uncertainty about these diseases. During the pandemic, anxiety, fear, and death were particularly high and therefore affected the social fabric of society. Another participant (P6) revealed:

The Covid-19 lockdown was a disaster for my family, plunging us into deep depression and stress. The root cause of our anxiety was the economic disruption, and at the same time, the lockdown led to inflation in household items, adding another burden when purchasing essentials. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic escalated the cost of health protection items such as masks and sanitizers, which I couldn't afford, putting my family at greater risk and intensifying our stress.

Family violence

Family violence surges during catastrophes, as social upheaval, economic strain, and prolonged stress awaken domestic tensions (Abbott et al., 2004; Herman, 2015). Women, children, and marginalized family members face heightened risks of physical and emotional abuse. Moreover, intimate partner violence, child abuse, and domestic violence slightly increase during catastrophes. Families of the daily earners often face family violence, fueled by chronic stress, poverty, and desperation. Financial insecurity, poverty, and a lack of social support networks create a toxic environment where tensions escalate, often resulting in verbal and physical abuse. To prevent the virus, the government took many necessary steps, like social

distancing, shelter-in-place orders, quarantines, and suspending economic and business activities, which drastically increased the risks of violence in families across the globe. During this crisis, family violence, including domestic violence and child abuse, increased because of unprecedented job losses, unemployment, reduced family income, and a lack of government social support. This increase in family violence may have been primarily due to the large-scale lockdown that aggravated family conflicts, economic distress and tension caused by the pandemic among family members, and inadequate support for victims of family violence during the pandemic. One of our participants (P5) stated:

The lockdown made our lives miserable and filled us with stress because I could not meet the household needs due to the lack of available work. I often scolded my children whenever they asked for pocket money. I also found work sometimes but the authorities did not allow me to collaborate or take up the work. During this time, my family faced numerous challenges, including stress, anxiety, and health problems. One of the main causes of family violence during this pandemic was job loss and the lack of money.

The pandemic cast a sharp light on interpersonal relationships, particularly as it led to an increase in family violence reports during and after the pandemic. Domestic violence was on the rise globally, but it was significantly higher during the Covid-19 pandemic compared to before the lockdown. The Covid-19 lockdown increased the cases of domestic abuse, which created tension in households. The pandemic worsened the conditions of working women because they faced high risks of job loss and numerous social issues and problems such as violence, exploitation, abuse, or harassment. One of the participants (P11) stated:

As the only breadwinner of my family, I worked as a sweeper at neighboring houses. However, the lockdown made our lives miserable. During the crisis, I was denied entry into homes due to the threat of coronavirus infection. Moreover, with the complete shutdown of workplaces, there was no alternative work available. In the first phase of the lockdown, my brother-in-law provided us with essential items. However, as the lockdown progressed, we endured a life of starvation because my brother-in-law stopped providing for us. The reason might have been the burden of supporting his own family. Our life during the Covid-19 lockdown was filled with hardship and misery.

Another participant (P12) stated:

I worked as a sweeper at a private school during the lockdown, but the school administration discontinued my services due to the closure of physical classes. This caused a tragedy for my family, as our once happy life abruptly transformed into one filled with mourning.

The pandemic further exacerbated the emotional toll of uncertainty, anxiety, and hopelessness that led to verbal and physical abuse, perpetuating cycles of violence within the family which affected their overall well-being.

Disruption of education of the children of daily wagers

Catastrophes intensify existing educational inequalities, particularly for vulnerable populations such as girls, and children who are from low-income backgrounds (Hyde et al., 2021). The pandemic and associated lockdown caused a massive disruption to India's education system, affecting nearly 320 million students across the country. During the crisis, the government

suddenly recommended online education, which mostly hit marginalized students who did not benefit from online education due to the non-availability of smartphones. A newspaper report indicates only 12.5 percent of students had access to smartphones. Against this backdrop, children from poor families mostly suffered from the closure of schools, colleges, and universities. In July 2020, the pandemic affected 98.6 percent of learners worldwide, spanning from pre-primary to higher education across 200 countries (United Nations, 2020). One of the participants in this line (P13) stated:

My child could not learn a single word because online education required a smartphone, which I could not buy due to the financial crisis.

During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, online learning was an unexplored experience that had unforeseen impacts and backfired in ways one had no control over. According to the UNICEF report for 2021, the closure of over 1.5 million schools in 2020 affected 247 million children in India enrolled in elementary and secondary schools. Another participant (P14) expressed:

Schools were closed continuously for two years, and now my child has forgotten the name of his school. The government announced online education, but my child could not benefit from it because, during this deadly pandemic, I could not fulfill my family's basic needs, making it even more difficult to buy a smartphone. As a result, the lockdown harmed my child's education.

The Covid-19 pandemic had huge effects on the education of poor children. Therefore, the children of the participants faced significant barriers to education and could not access quality education because they were trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty.

Conclusion

Daily wagers, a marginalized segment of society, were disproportionately affected by Covid-19 as a catastrophe, experiencing compounded economic hardships, social vulnerabilities, job loss, and psychological trauma. The impact was not limited to physical health; it also increased anxiety and poverty among them. Furthermore, it was difficult for them to find work, severely affecting their livelihood. They were hit by a double crisis. In addition, child labor, child abuse, and family conflicts emerged as some of the negative outcomes. The lockdown also halted their regular income and forced them to live under constant stress. Moreover, the pandemic compelled school-going children from poor families to work to support their households. There is an urgent need for robust job policies and disaster relief mechanisms that can provide basic needs, financial stability, and protection during such catastrophes.

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