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COVID-19, Irregular Migration and Asymmetrical Dependency

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the process of irregular migration that drives people to opt for illegal channels to migrate. The study further examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socio-economic vulnerabilities of irregular migrant workers. We find that due to COVID-19, irregular migrants suffered job losses, with only a few cases of job restoration. Their predicament is compounded given their questionable legal status, economic vulnerabilities, the stance of governments of the host and origin countries, vulnerability to poverty, and resort only to social capital as social security. We suggest that the governments should intervene to facilitate irregular migrants during pandemics.

Keywords: COVID-19; Irregular Migration; Pakistan; Europe

1. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of a debate on the migration-development-security nexus, the situation of COVID-19 has put irregular migrants into greater socio-economic and health vulnerabilities. Most of the irregular migrants across the globe are absorbed in the informal sectors of the host countries. Hence outlining their health, social and economic crises during COVID-19 is a matter of academic and policy concern of current research. Over the last two decades, particularly, the notion of irregular migration has added to human sufferings and vulnerabilities. The irregular migration puts pressure on the host and origin countries on three levels: micro (individual, concerning human choices, behaviours, and survival), meso (organisational, societal, and structural), and macro (political and social policy).

We explore the process of irregular migration that drives people to opt for illegal channels to migrate from Pakistan to other countries, mainly Europe.¹ The study further examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socio-economic vulnerabilities of irregular migrant workers.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of migration trends from Pakistan, focusing on irregular migration. Section 3 presents brief literature on the reasons underlying illegal channels of migration. Section 4 explains the data and research methodology. Section 5 offers findings based on qualitative interviews, and the last section gives policy recommendations to facilitate irregular migrant workers during a pandemic.

2. MIGRATION FROM PAKISTAN: STYLISED FACTS

Pakistan provides an interesting locus to study irregular migration. Since 1970, more than 11 million people have proceeded abroad for employment, mainly to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (around 96 percent migration to GCC countries). Approximately 52 percent of migrant workers from Punjab, 26 percent from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and 9.5 percent from Sindh (Arif et al. 2019); (GOP, 2020). Among the skilled workers (42 percent), most were involved in semi-skilled workers such as; welders, secretaries, masons, carpenters, and plumbers. Another category of labour migration comprised unskilled labourers (39 percent) such as agriculturists, labourers, or farmers.

Apart from legal migration, there is massive irregular migration from Pakistan, especially to Europe. The number of irregular migrants is unknown, and the issue comes to the fore only when migrants are deported back to Pakistan or apprehended as illegal

¹The irregular migration includes people; (i) who enter a country's border without proper permission; (ii) who may have entered country by following legal procedures but have remained there after expiry of visa or work permit, and (iii) who are facilitated by migrant smugglers or human traffickers in their cross-border movement.

residents of the host country (Shah et al. 2020). More than 85 percent of all deportees are coming back from the Gulf. About 6767 irregular migrants entered Europe in 2017. Iran deports over 20,000 Pakistani migrants every year. In the last four years, Iran has expelled 80040, Turkey deported 10476 individuals, and European Union exiled more than 20,000 Pakistanis. (Shah et al. 2020)

There is no single coherent policy that comprehensively covers different types of migration. Also, specific policy on how to deal with irregular or illegal migration is lacking (Iqbal 2016). Policy frameworks available for dealing, one way or the other, with irregular migration and concerned organisations are indicated in Table 1 (IOM 2019). These organisations and policies address and cater to emigrants, immigrants, and illegal/legal dimensions of migration. Understanding the role and practices of these organisations is critical for understanding the social processes involving irregular migration. Yet, there are lacunae when it comes to the role of informal institutions, in particular the social institutions on which this research tends to focus.

Table 1

<i>Institutions and Policies to Regulate International Migration from Pakistan</i>	
Institutions	Objectives
Ministry of Interior	Registration, immigration, naturalisation, regulation, entry, and exit of foreigners, and anti-smuggling.
Migration Management Cell	Mandate specifies to coordinate with multiple ministries, organisations, and stakeholders to combat human trafficking.
National Aliens Registration Authority	Registration and specification of unregistered foreigners.
Ministry of Labour, Manpower and Overseas Pakistan	Consists of three organisations functioning under its mandate: Overseas Pakistanis Foundation, Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employments, and Overseas employment corporation The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, in particular, is responsible for regulating and protecting Pakistani migrant workers.
Federal Investigation Agency	Responsible for carrying out investigations on anti-terrorism, and human trafficking.
Policies	Objectives
Naturalisation Act, 1926	Specification of rules and regulations about naturalisation processes. Specifications of eligibility criteria, identifying definitional lacunas, and ascertaining application procedures are covered in this Act.
Pakistan Citizenship Act, 1951	Specification of rules of gaining and losing Pakistani citizenship.
Pakistan Citizenship Rules, 1952	
The Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939	Specification of registration requirements for foreigners.
The Foreigners Act, 1946	Authorises Federal Government to modify or change conditions for foreigners entering and leaving the country.
Passport Rules, 1974	Specification of rules and regulations for acquiring Pakistani passports.
The Emigration Rules, 1979	Specifies rules and regulations for emigration from Pakistan. Deals with laws related to work licensing abroad, minimum wage levels, and age.

Source: Author's formulation.

3. WHY IRREGULAR MIGRATION? LITERATURE REVIEW

Pakistan is an exciting space to study irregular migration in contemporary and temporal settings, particularly COVID-19 (Iqbal 2020). Apart from legal migration (around 11 million people have proceeded abroad since 1970), there is massive irregular migration, especially to Europe, from Pakistan.

Numan (2020),² while articulating the plight of migrants who use illegal channels for migration to the European countries, especially Germany, notes that the pandemic has resurfaced layered nature of social, economic, political, and ethnic divides and the inequalities linked to each. The COVID-19 has re-emphasised that access to a good quality standard of living and medical care has never been equally distributed globally, nationally, and locally. The cross-border restrictions have cramped many irregular migrants in tight living spaces where maintaining social distancing is impossible.

The literature suggests that several socio-economic factors compel an individual to use the illegal channel for migration. Iqbal (2020) shows that the poor are the most adversely impacted by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns as they lack resources for self-sustenance.³ Among the poor are those who work in informal sectors, mainly daily wage workers, and those who work in the agriculture sector for livelihood.⁴

Numan (2020) finds that find three factors that explain irregular migration: (i) The *fundamental* factors such as population growth, social disintegration, environmental disorder, and economic reorganisation. (ii) The *proximate* factors that trigger people to migrate, including migration, low income, unemployment, labour demand in host countries, social conflicts, and viable opportunities in foreign lands. (iii) The *sustaining factors* such as network, resource and knowledge, travel possibilities, and home and host countries' legislation.

One of the widely reported reasons for migration is poverty (Arif et al. 2019). The Pakistan Action Plan for Combating Human Trafficking also accepts poverty as the fundamental reason for irregular migration. Tahir et al. (2018) allude to the cognitive functioning and social preferences that induce people to improve their quality of life, which is possible only if they migrate to other countries. Besides, the high cost of acquiring a visa, the cost of compliance with legal procedures and documentation provides another reason for people to opt for irregular migration (Amjad et al. 2017; Shah et al. 2020).

The relation between illegal migrants and recruiter/employers/institutions is asymmetrical. It is based on inequality where the later exploits the former. In this regard, the focus of the current paper is on socio-spatial mobility which binds both illegal migrants and recruiters with each other. Dependencies among social actors are the result of controlling the actions and resources of one social actor by another actor. The notion of *asymmetry* is grounded in the fact that exploitation and expropriation is in the hands of one social actor, and another is at the receiving end. In such an interplay among social actors and asymmetries existing among them, some actors are at a loss because one's autonomy is contingent on someone else's dependency. In this context, dependent actors are pushed towards subservience so that they cannot exit from these vicious cycles, or

² <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/pakistan-covid-19/>

³ <https://pide.org.pk/pdf/PIDE-COVID-Bulletin.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.routedmagazine.com/covid-pakistan-perspective>

articulate their voices, or exert their agencies. We have focused on these themes in the section on visual analysis.

In Pakistan, different individuals and agents facilitate the process of irregular migration. These agents include labour recruiters, immigration lawyers, travel agents, brokers, housing providers, remittances agencies, and customs officials. Institutions such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) also provide official resettlements. NGOs, facilitate and provide assistance and shelter to migrants and refugees. These agents and individuals are being grouped and described by analysts to create a new migration industry, including migrant smugglers and human traffickers. The economic profits accrued by this industry not only justify its existence but also add to its momentum.

4. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative approach to achieve the objectives mentioned in Section 1. We aim to investigate the relationship between irregular migration and social variables such as legal course, social capital, coping mechanisms, and social security. Using purposive sampling we selected respondents for telephonic interviews. The respondents were working as irregular migrants in the informal sector of host countries namely Greece, Germany, the UK, Italy, and North America.

The study uses a descriptive research design to articulate the relationship between irregular migration, social capital, coping mechanism, and social security, among others. Chawla and Sondhi (2018) and Bryman (2012) among others suggest this method. Using the proposed design, we aim to provide a comprehensive and detailed explanation of the relationship between irregular migration and work, survival, and life in the wake of COVID-19.

The study uses various data sources to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on irregular migrant workers' socio-economic well-being. For trend analysis, this study uses secondary data published in various reports on irregular migrants, including reports published by international organisations, local researchers, and official websites.

For impact analysis, we collected primary data using the telephonic interview. Our data collection units include irregular migrants who have opted for irregular channels of migration to travel to European countries (Germany, Italy, UK, and Greece) and North America. Telephonic interviews were conducted with the respondents identified by key informants (social researchers who had prior research experience on the subject matter). The instrument used for conducting interviews was an interview guide. Using purposive sampling, we conducted ten telephonic interviews. Key informants helped us in identifying the status of irregular migrants. Our criterion was; (i) the respondent must be currently in the host country, (ii) has been impacted socio-economically due to COVID-19 and (iii) has a questionable legal status in the host country. Another important criterion for selecting respondents was their absorption in the informal sector in the host countries, and that their employability had been adversely impacted due to COVID-19.

Informed consent was obtained from the respondents interviewed—that is the objectives of the study were communicated to the respondents, and after their approval to take part in the study, they were interviewed. The data was recorded, transcribed, translated, and then themed under different categories. Bold (2011) among others suggests this method.

The tool of qualitative content analysis provided a detailed explanation for understanding the social processes through which migrants go through and, while doing so, how dependent they become on other social actors. For this reason, we have analysed short documentaries using qualitative content analysis.

5. FINDINGS: PAKISTANI IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF COVID-19

5.1. Why Migrate Illegally?

Due to COVID-19, irregular migrants have lost jobs, which in a few cases have been restored. The issues of legality vs. illegality of their status, economic vulnerabilities, the role of governments of the host and origin countries, irregular migrants as vulnerably poor, and only the social capital as serving as social security are some of the key findings in terms of what kinds of adverse circumstances illegal migrants face.

Several reasons, as quoted by the respondents, are stated in the following. These findings reflect on the reasons of the future dependencies of people on each other for illegal migration. The second point reflects on the facilitation provided by the extended family and the recruiters who reached out to help people become dependent as illegal migrants. It is detailed in the subsequent sections that people become dependent for their physical survival on these recruiters during traveling, and some have even lost their lives along the way.

Several reasons have been quoted by the irregular migrants to opt for illegal channel to migrate, these include:

- Due to widespread unemployment and huge wage differentials between the developed and developing countries, people from remote areas, rural or peri-urban areas willingly opt for illegal migration.
- Before opting for illegal channels to migrate, two respondents had tried legal channels but were not allowed to migrate legally. Consequentially, they opted for illegal migration.
- In some cases, family unification was the impetus, and the helping hands were extended by the already-settled members of the family in the foreign countries.
- With a surplus of labour and lack of employment opportunities, respondents looked out for various avenues to secure livelihoods in foreign countries whose major lure is the higher wages for the working class. The information of high earnings is not confirmed in literature; instead, it reached out to them through social networking.
- One respondent being part of a left-wing political was abducted from his native town and upon release, he was scared of his life in KPK. Given the threat to his life he migrated through the illegal channel. He was facilitated by the people who had already undergone the process. Thus conflict in the origin countries may also lead to irregular migration.
- Cross-cultural differences, higher life expectancy, better business opportunities, and better living standards are some other reasons quoted by the respondents who opted to migrate.

5.2. COVID-19 and Economic Vulnerabilities of Illegal Migrants

There are no statistics to substantiate the exact number of irregular migrants in Pakistan. UK government agencies approximate that around one million irregular migrants are residing in the UK. Among them are thousands of Pakistanis who are extremely vulnerable people in the country for the following reasons:

- Irregular workers, lacking work permits, have to work in the informal sector mostly under compromised working conditions and on exploitative terms. The economic opportunities, being limited for them, they work below the minimum wage. Still, they manage to remit some money to the families in the origin country. COVID-19 has deteriorated their conditions as many migrant workers (including women and children) work in restaurants, takeaways, construction, and building sectors. Considering that these sectors have been hardest hit due to lockdowns, most irregular migrants lost their income sources, especially those who did not have strong communal diasporic associations within the host country.
- The UK government has allocated vast amounts of money for support packages for its citizens and settled workers. Similarly, grants and loans are being offered for businesses. These credit extension programs and social security packages are not available to irregular migrants.
- The economic deprivation is also exacerbated by the fear of being identified as an irregular migrant worker and deported back to the country of origin. Migrant workers fear that they will be persecuted in their home country if they manage to get back. These include failed asylum seekers who, as per law, were required to provide concrete evidence of the threat and intimidation they would face if they were relocated to their home country. In the United Kingdom, those who manage to provide enough verifiable proof receive 37.75 UK pounds per week.

A failed Pakistani asylum seeker in Germany said,

"The status of illegality is a bit tricky in Germany. There are few real illegals in the country because most have a Duldung, not a residence permit but just a temporary deportation suspension. Such people are neither legally nor illegally residing in Germany. In any case, many of these still live in shared accommodations with very little space and insufficient sanitary infrastructure; it is difficult to escape an infection there, once the virus has entered the place."

These excerpts from the findings reflect on the layered nature of dependencies - asymmetrical dependencies are exacerbated when people choose to opt for illegal ways to migrate and work in the informal sector of host countries with no labour rights guaranteed. So, there is an intersectional lens to understand such a dependency. Secondly, the fear of being identified as an 'illegal migrant' makes the illegal migrants remain on the fringes of society, making them more dependent on their employers and blackmailing recruiters.

5.3. The Role of State and Government

The formality of institutions is the biggest hurdle for illegal migrants to be classified as recipients of the social security program. Being illegal they remain deprived of credit extensions and are excluded from social security programmes. Other severe

implications occur in the form of more structural dependence on exploitative employers, masters, and recruiters with minimum negotiating power.

The situation is not too bad when it comes to Italy as one 35-year-old irregular migrant working in the agriculture sector for the cultivation of vegetables since 2011 shared the following text.

“Yes, I got infected, and I was scared of dying. The attack was not as severe the way it was all over Italy. The government showed full support by providing instructions about SoPs, but there isn't any system in place for the illegal migrants. We were strictly disallowed social mobility, due to which I stayed at home for one month. But I had to earn and send money back home as well. Thankfully, my employer allowed me to work informally, but the timings of the work were reduced and staggered. After one month of staying home, he allowed me to work for 15 days a month, and for the rest, I was at home. Considering the financial pressures we face, the employer also paid us full salaries during the COVID-19.”

A respondent working informally in the agriculture sector of Canada explained the facilitating role of the diaspora.

“Yes, informal systems such as Pakistani diaspora or local civil society raise funds, identify us, and reach out to us, but who are we? How can we be located and reached out? Is there any guarantee that all of us are being helped by such informal networking? No, it is high time that we should be considered a recipient of State's package programs as we have spent years here without being paid for the amount of hard work we put in.”

Reflecting on the situation during the COVID-19 crisis, a US-based migrant who has eventually received a work permit claimed:

“Most people lost their jobs during the pandemic, and I also lost my job too, but the government paid social security in the form of cash. Unlike others, I was a social security cash recipient because I received a work permit a few years ago. Those who didn't have a work permit were working in different restaurants for survival.”

5.4. Coping Strategy, If Any?

The following excerpts suggest that the coping strategies are based on social capital, which results from informal networking with other illegal migrants, or with some legal migrants, or in general with the diaspora communities, especially the Pakistani community. Their need for economic survival on social capital is again short-lived and transient and is a serious concern for the state of structural and asymmetrical dependencies.

One Greece-based illegal migrant, while reflecting on the adhocism of coping mechanisms shared the following:

“The coping strategies vary from one destination country to another. In some regions, we may find some close relatives and take refuge with them, but in most

cases, we spend time in safe houses while working in agri-fields and getting minimum wages. The masters are manipulating us since we have no legal status. Some among us give up the aspirations and voluntarily repatriate back home. Some get refugees in refugee camps. Let me reassert; the situation is very bleak for us.”

Speaking about social capital as a coping strategy, one US-based illegal migrant responded:

“Yes, the Pakistani community fully supported people financially during the COVID. The owners of different buildings were soft on people regarding payment of rent during the pandemic.”

Similarly, Germany-based respondent stated:

“The people who have legal status fully support illegal migrants as they work with and for them as domestic help in their homes, in stores, in small companies, and in agri-lands. The employers also provided them with monthly food staples and cash.”

5.5. Securitisation of Border

Strict surveillance and tough security across borders have restricted peoples’ cross-border movements via legal routes, due to which people opt for irregular migration. COVID-19 is thought to have reduced such mobility further, but the respondents who worked in small farmland in Germany said that the numbers have not decreased and despite the pandemic, people are willing to risk their lives; due to conflict, forceful evictions, and despair, and mainly in the hope of opportunities and better living conditions abroad. He also wished that governments should relax the tough security measures to ease cross-border movements, which will also help in reducing the risks associated with life-threatening journeys of the irregular migrants.

Restriction on socio-spatial mobility is another critical aspect of the security measures over the borders. Such restrictions lead to subaltern identities being controlled, being under constant surveillance, and being under subservience, aggrandising their vulnerabilities to the point of opting for illegal channels for their socio-spatial mobility.

5.6. The Role of Federal Investigation Agency (FIA)

The respondents were critical of the FIA, which is tasked with combating human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants in Pakistan. Regarding illegal migration, its mandate specifies the prosecuting, punishing, and preventing human trafficking and illegal migration.

The FIA’s website⁵ claims of arresting 18 most wanted traffickers and smugglers in 2018 with the finalisation of 6343 cases out of a total of 7037 cases. However, the state institution maintains silence on the number of illegal Pakistani migrants residing in foreign countries and the health and socio-economic issues that the irregular migrants face.

⁵<http://www.fia.gov.pk/en/ahtc.php>

5.7. The Vulnerably Poor

The notion of vulnerably poor, interplays with the concepts of; vulnerability, dependency, and the structuration thesis. A report published by Rights & Security International titled ‘COVID-19: A tool kit for Civil Society Partners’⁶ in 2020 provides a detailed classification of the vulnerably poor who have been adversely impacted by the worldwide lockdown situation. Speaking particularly of illegal migrants, the report outlines severe consequences for the following reasons, also reflective of the situations for illegal migrants interviewed for the current research.

- The lockdown situation has compelled massive migration from host to origin countries, which in addition to creating financial issues, has also increased the susceptibility of transmitting infection.
- Many migrants with illegal status are not qualified for health services, such as those in the UK are not nominated as formally employed workers under the UK’s National Health Service. Hence they are excluded from the state’s social security programs, testing, and prevention.

5.8. The Need for Doable Interventions

Based on the findings of the research, interventions are required. The forms of doable interventions in contemporary situational settings of the country are as follows:

- The countries, including Pakistan, have migrants stranded in overcrowded spaces due to a lack of autonomous resources. Given the situation, the origin and host countries must relax the stringent conditionality of documentation, formal employment, legal status, and work permits as qualifying criteria to benefit from relief programs and packages.
- The lockdown had disproportionate effects on the vulnerably poor. The institutionalised policies and frameworks compounded by the preventive measures under COVID-19 are already marginalising the poor. In this situation, mapping the vulnerably poor and including illegal migrants into the policy ambit is the need of the hour.
- Building alliances between the state institutions and civil society is important to devise socially responsive and contextual policies.
- For failed asylum seekers, the cases should be reconsidered, and the host countries should relax border-mobility restrictions.

5.9. Visual Analysis

Following extracts have emerged from the analysis of visuals extracted from short documentaries themed on illegal migration. For this study, we watched documentaries based on irregular and illegal migration, selected clips that reflect asymmetrical dependencies, and transcribed and translated these into English.

⁶ https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/RSI_COVID-19_toolkit_ENGLISH_29JUNE.pdf

<p>Case 1:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[voiceover]</i></p> <p>Frustrated with the lack of opportunities and searching for a more fulfilling life, 21 years old young man embarked upon his journey with the help of a local agent.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“He told me that I would have to work for 8 hours a day six days a week for which I will receive Rupees 40,000 a month.” (illegal migrant survivor)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[voiceover]</i></p> <p>But this was a lie. Upon arrival in Turkey, the traffickers demanded more money from his family and tortured him.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“They didn’t give us food. They inflicted torture on us and kept us locked in a hall with over 250 people.” (illegal migrant survivor)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[voiceover]</i></p> <p>Some 15 days into this ordeal, the traffickers sent his father a picture of him in which a huge nail was seen inserted in his foot. To save his only son, the father gathered around Rupees. 3 lac and paid the traffickers for his son’s relief.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“The youngsters here are a little naive. The son insisted that he wanted to go abroad, and we borrowed some money and made arrangements. And then we borrowed money again to have him released. My message to youngsters and parents is that they should stay home with contentment with what they have. No guarantee opting for such illegal ways of migration would ensure survival.” (illegal migrant’s father)</i></p> <p>Case 2:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“He told me that he was very afraid. He asked me to let go of him and leave him in God’s mercy, and I did.” (deceased illegal migrant’s mother)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[voiceover]</i></p> <p>This is the last time the mother heard from his son. The migrant left for Greece in August 2016, and the agent assured the mother that he would reach his destination safely, but this was a lie again. After his departure, the agent kept asking for more money; when there came the point that she couldn’t pay him anymore, the news came.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“The agent called me one day, claimed that my son had died. I went to our local authorities and demanded justice.” (deceased illegal migrant’s mother)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[voiceover]</i></p> <p>She fought her case, and some of the agents involved were arrested, but the loss of a son can never be healed.</p> <p>Case 3:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“First, we learned that our son was sick. We were unable to contact him. After two years, they (human traffickers) asked us to pay money for his return. I paid them twice, but my son didn’t return. Eventually, I was told that my son had died. I don’t even know when he exactly died.” (illegal deceased migrant’s father)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[voiceover]</i></p> <p>His death has left the family devastated. The family holds the agent responsible for his son’s death.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“I am dissatisfied with the role of investigating officials. I wanted to file a police complaint against suspected agents, but a police officer demanded a bribe. Eventually, I paid them money. But it took over a year to register a police complaint.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>(illegal deceased migrant’s father)</i></p>
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The extracts from interviews of documentaries as stated above reveal the process of irregular migration in the following stages.

- **First Stage:** Information about local agents. The information is circulated through informal networking such as families, friends, and neighbours. The agents and recruiters create a word of mouth among young men about affordable and safe routes to reach foreign destinations. The informal dissemination used by recruiters and agents is also inter-generational which builds further as a result of vertical and horizontal social linkages through close friends and family friends.

- **Second Stage:** Extraction of money from locals by agents for preparation of forged documents and transportation.
- **Third Stage:** Unsafe voyage by sea.
- **Fourth Stage:** Kidnapped and kept as captives for ransom money from families.

Based on these stages and verbatim narratives under the heading of visual analysis, the following asymmetrical dependencies have been identified:

- The dependence of natives on a local agent who functions through building informal coalitions with human traffickers. The experiences of dependency are complex for both agents and the natives as agents depend on natives for money (by selling their services). The dependence of the natives on agents is owed to the former's quest to reach lucrative destinations. The dependence, however, is asymmetrical; the locals give in for a deal in which they are exploited and expropriated, even their lives are at risk.
- The data also reveals that upon reaching their destinations, the locals are kept hostage, violence is perpetrated against them, and ransom is demanded by the agents from the families of captives.
- The family borrows money to secure release their sons from agents and despite paying ransom amounts they are killed by the agents (as the 2 cases in the visual analysis shows).

The themes that emerged from the visuals speak of intersectional asymmetrical dependencies linked to poverty, vulnerability to poverty, structural inequalities, social power, material, and non-material exploitation. Also, the findings conform to the existing body of literature on asymmetrical dependencies which speak of resource exploitation, security issues, aspirations for a better quality of life, and the role of informal institutions in propagating asymmetrical dependencies.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper attempted to highlight the reasons for illegal migration experienced by people who had migrated to Western countries. The sampled respondents were from Greece, Germany, UK, Italy, and North America, who talked about the socio-economic conditions compelling them to opt for irregular migration. The study also describes the legal and socio-economic challenges the respondents have faced due to COVID-19. Based on the research results, we recommend that the governments should intervene to alleviate the suffering of irregular migrants during the ongoing pandemic. The forms of doable interventions include;

First, the countries, including Pakistan, have irregular migrants living in overcrowded spaces due to a lack of resources to self-sustain themselves. In the wake of this reality, the origin and host countries must relax the stringent conditionality of documentation, formal employment, legal status, and work permits as qualifying criteria to avail the relief programs and packages.

Second, the lockdowns had a disproportionately larger impact on those who are vulnerable to poverty. The institutionalised policies and frameworks compounded by the preventive measures under COVID-19 are already marginalising the poor. In this

situation, mapping the vulnerably poor and including irregular migrants into the policy ambit is mandatory.

Third, building alliances between the state institutions and civil society is also mandatory to devise socially responsive and contextual policies.

Lastly, the cases of failed asylum seekers may be reconsidered on humanitarian grounds, and the host countries should also relax border-mobility restrictions.

In sum, this study proposes to deconstruct existing stringent legal and spatial barriers to comfort the irregular migrants. Secondly, the study calls for adopting a more collaborative and sectoral approach to include the irregular migrants as vulnerable to poverty in host countries' social security packages. The lack of data is an obstacle in identifying the irregular migrants; hence their geographic and social mapping is also critical. The role of networking and social capital may prove instrumental in the social mapping of the target population.

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