

The Impact of the Covid-19 Outbreak on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Quetta

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Abstract

This research aimed to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) operating in Quetta. During the pandemic there were social restrictions on people and businesses were prevented from operating. Many of the MSMEs were affected brutally. No research has been done regarding Quetta, especially about MSMEs. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on MSMEs in Quetta. The survey method was used in this study. Questionnaires were distributed by hand and online to 385 MSMEs from Quetta. The data was analyzed descriptively. Several key impacts such as financial problems, operational problems, supply chain and distribution blockades, decline in demand etc., were identified. The MSMEs of Quetta dealt with these problems through reducing their employees, their salaries, and working hours etc. This study also gives suggestions to deal with Covid-19 like situations for future policy making regarding MSMEs.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Outbreak, Impacts, Measures, MSMEs.

Introduction

Background of the Study

The Covid-19 pandemic brutally affected the world. The preventive measures of the disease i.e., lock downs, and transport and travel restrictions were taxing on economies globally. Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) were among the worst affected sectors in these countries (Shafi et al., 2020). Millions of people contracted Covid-19 and many lost their lives worldwide. In Pakistan as well, millions got infected and thousands died. After it was labeled as a pandemic by the WHO in March 2020 (WHO, 2020), the rising infection cases prompted Pakistan government to impose countrywide lockdowns lasting months. Targeted lock downs were also placed in major cities called smart lockdowns. Travel and trade with bordering countries were restricted (Shafi et al., 2020). The cycle of these strict restrictions and subsequent eases created an uncertain environment for the MSMEs. The abrupt lockdowns in particular, led to many problems for MSMEs nationwide (Shafi et al., 2020). Most small enterprises of Balochistan because of their dependence on border trade suffered by the pandemic as well.

Problem Statement

Several studies were carried out to see the impact of the Covid-19 on MSMEs in Pakistan, but no research MSMEs of Quetta was carried out. Therefore, this study aims to identify the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on MSMEs in Quetta.

Significance / Justification of the Study

This study will contribute into the literature and will provide significant insights into the difficulties of MSMEs caused by the pandemic helping the policy makers in future policy making.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on MSMEs in Quetta.
- To explore the measures taken by MSMEs to overcome their problems due to the pandemic.

Research Questions:

Research question. 1. What impact the covid-19 pandemic had on MSMEs in Quetta?

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Research question. 2. What measures were used to deal with the impact of the pandemic?

Literature Review

MSMEs definition

The MSMEs sector roughly accounts for more than 90% of the total businesses in the country (SBP, 2016; Shah, 2018). In Pakistan there is no set definition for MSMEs. Most MSMEs are informal and unregistered making it impossible to determine their actual number (Williams and shahid, 2014; Williams et al., 2016; Hussain, 2020). According to SMEDA (2018) businesses that employ 250 or less people and have an initial investment of Rs.25M, revenues of Rs.250M or less annually are Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) defines small enterprises as having less than PKR 150 million annual turnover. The medium enterprises as having annual turnovers of more than PKR 150 million and less than PKR 800 million (SME-PRs, 2022).

According to research, MSMEs in Balochistan account for a very small fraction of the country's whole economic activities. The province only accounted for 2.9% of the whole GDP of the country in the financial year of 2016-17. The MSMSE sector in Balochistan is comprised of services, agriculture, and industry sector. Around 46% of the province's GDP is formed by the services sector, followed by the agriculture (28%) and industry sectors (27%) (Pasha, 2018). As the largest and most populated city of Balochistan, Quetta has the biggest concentration of the MSMEs. The actual number of the MSMEs in Quetta is unknown.

Covid-19 impact on MSMEs worldwide

Despite their importance in the economy, MSMEs generally suffer from weak performance and high failure rates (Hashim et al., 2018; Machirori & Fatoki, 2013). In a study conducted by the Harvard Business School on the impact of the Covid-19 on SMEs, the authors reported that the pandemic left small businesses financially fragile (Bartik et al., 2020). Kaberia and Muathe (2020) studied women entrepreneurs of Kenya, and found a significant number of SMEs failing to deal with the crisis caused by the pandemic because of their small size and lack of resources. According to Juergensen et al. (2020), who surveyed European SMEs, firms experienced major troubles in supply chains because of logistics blockades. Robinson and Kengatharan (2020) in their study of 14 small businesses of Srilanka, reported declined demand as one of biggest impacts of the pandemic. A survey of Small American firms was conducted by the National Small Business Association (NSBA). It reported financial struggles, decreased demand of products and services as impacts of the Covid-19. Larsson and Gustavsson, (2020) carried out a study of Swedish hospitality businesses. They found that industry wise businesses experienced different effects of the pandemic. Essential businesses such as grocery shops or drug stores, were allowed to operate. Whereas, the hospitality sector struggled because of severe restrictions on their operations. Nyanga and Zirima, (2020) studied the impact of the pandemic on SMEs in Masvingo Zimbabwe. They found small businesses had stopped their productions and laid off employees in order to endure the crisis caused by the pandemic. The Zimbabwean SMEs had also managed their businesses online. They had bought and sold products and kept connection with their employees and customers through the internet. A similar study was carried out in Malaysia by Omar et al. (2020). The authors discovered the SMEs were at the verge of bankruptcy in case movement control orders were prolonged. And the import dependent businesses were short of input materials because of the closure of borders. Lutfi et al. (2020) examined the impact of the Covid-19 on Indonesian SMEs. Their study indicated that the pandemic had adverse effects on SMEs i.e., the SMEs had declined demand, reduced incomes, and in some cases zero income as well. The economic stimulus packages offered by the Indonesian government prevented the SMEs from laying off their employees. Aledjibi (2020) studied the impact of the pandemic on 360 SMEs in a major city of Nigeria. The results of the study indicated that the firms had declined revenues which led them to lay off employees and cut wages and salaries. Similarly, Ratnasingam et al. (2020) surveyed 748 Malaysian furniture manufacturers to gauge the impact of the pandemic. The study discovered that The SMEs finances, raw materials supply chains and productions were disrupted severely. The SMEs' employees either refused to work or did not show up because of the contagious nature of the virus.

Effects of the pandemic on MSMEs in Pakistan

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdowns, MSMEs in all sectors in Pakistan were threatened. Shah et al. (2020) emphasized that MSMEs in Pakistan to be especially at risk because of the corona virus pandemic. In the early days of the corona virus outbreak 172 MSMEs in Balochistan were

surveyed. In the survey many agribusinesses and farm businesses had felt the adverse effects of the pandemic (GRASP, 2020). Sakina, Fatima and Khan, (2022) in their study also highlighted the impact of the covid-19 on different sectors of the economy. Muhammad et al. (2020) in a survey of the government of Balochistan found the services sector to have been hit very badly by the pandemic. According to the authors the Covid-19 pandemic had far worse impending effects on the informal sector than the formal. In another survey of various MSMEs across Pakistan, most of the firms reported harsh and negative impacts of the pandemic. A lack of demand and employee absenteeism were reported as the worst effects of the pandemic. Other impacts included income shrinkages, employee layoffs, raw material shortages and subsequent price hikes etc., (UNIDO, 2020). Similarly, Shafi et al. (2020) in their study of 184 MSMEs across Pakistan, discovered that most of the businesses had felt the effects of the Covid-19 outbreak. A significant number of the SMEs reported to have been hurt very harshly because of the corresponding shutdowns.

Aftab et al. (2021) studied 1207 MSMEs across Pakistan's largest populated cities that were most affected by the pandemic. They discovered business operations to have shut down because of the strict lockdowns. They also found financial deficiencies and troubles in product supplies to be the major impacts of the pandemic with disruptions in the supply chains. The Covid-19 pandemic was a medical emergency that is why the pharmaceutical stores and other businesses related to medicines and drugs etc., were not as affected as the services sector. Other sectors i.e., tourism, aviation and hotel industry, because of their nonessential nature and the severe lockdowns, suffered heavily (Afridi and Jan, 2020).

In Pakistan only less than a third of SMEs were able to have their employees work from home because of their lack of adequate financial and technological resources (Aftab et al., 2021). Similarly, Shafi et al. (2020) in their study found Pakistani MSMEs at a lack of adequate resources and proper knowledge for telework. Nevertheless, it was revealed that not all MSMEs have the essential resources nor the appropriate business structures to adopt such a strategy.

Methodology

In this study quantitative analysis technique was utilized. Primary data was collected via the survey method. The population for this study included every MSME that operates in Quetta. The sample size was obtained through Cochran's formula, which is used for calculating sample sizes for unknown population. The final sample size was 385. In order to collect data, the list of the MSMEs was obtained from SMEDA. Convenience sampling technique was used for data collection because the population of the study was unknown. The questionnaire used in this study is by the US bureau of labor statistics and is available on their website. This questionnaire has been used in international studies such as by Bartik et al. (2020) and Ratnasingam et al. (2020). In Pakistan Shafi et al. (2020) and Aftab et al. (2021) used this questionnaire in their studies. The data has been collected from the owners and the managers of the MSMEs. Around 290 questionnaires were distributed and collected personally. Whereas, the rest were collected online via a questionnaire formed on the Google Docs. The total questionnaires received back were 369 out of the 385-sample size. The data was analyzed using the descriptive analysis technique via the IBM Statistical packages for social sciences software (SPSS). The data was represented in tabular and graphical form. The descriptive statistics offer comprehensive evidence about each participant as well as the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on each of the MSMEs.

Findings, Discussion and Implications of Study

The sectoral distribution of the MSMEs in the data collected is as follows; Out of 369 MSMEs, more than half of the businesses were either retailers or wholesalers. Manufacturing businesses constituted 7.3% of the sample size. Around 14% MSMEs were from the service sector, and 9.5% were from the Transportation/communication sector. A large number of the respondents that is 96.7% or 357 respondents had annual turnovers of less than 150 million PKR per year. Only 3.3% or 12 respondents had annual turnovers of more than 150m PKR.

To check the impact of the Covid-19 on MSMEs in Quetta, first the impact of the Covid-19 was examined on the operations of the MSMEs. Later on, the financial impact of the Covid-19 and the impact on the sales and profitability were also examined. After that, the measures that the MSMEs used to mitigate the effects of the pandemic were examined. Cross-tabulations were carried out to observe the impact on the micro and small firms separately, and the medium firms, separately. Firms

with PKR 150M or less annual turnover were considered micro and small enterprises, while firms with an annual turnover of more than 150M PKR were considered medium enterprises.

The impact of the Covid-19 on the operations of the MSMEs

Numerous crucial issues were identified in this study regarding the obstacles faced by the MSMEs during the pandemic. First, the impact of the pandemic was examined on the routine operations of the MSMEs (Figure 1). A significant portion of the sample i.e., 68% had difficulties in obtaining their supplies and inputs. Aftab et al. (2021) reported similar results in their study of the impact of the Covid-19 on 1207 Pakistani firms. Around 72% of the participants in their study experienced deficiency of raw materials and inputs. Shafi et al. (2020) studied the impact of the pandemic on 187 SMEs across Pakistan. They reported disturbances in the supply chains of the businesses as one of the most recounted issues. Similar issues were discovered by the National Small Business Association (2020). Juergensen et al. (2020), who examined the Covid-19 effect on European SMEs, and Ratnasingam et al. (2020), who studied the impact of the pandemic on SMEs of Malaysian furniture industry, also reported similar impacts.

In this study, several MSMEs i.e., 65.6% had troubles in moving or shipping their goods. Similarly, in the study of Shafi et al. (2020) approximately 68% participants of their study experienced complications and disturbances in the shipping and moving of their goods and services. In the study of Aftab et al. (2021) supply chain disruptions were among the most reported effect of the pandemic i.e., 68%. Juergensen et al. (2020) also stated matching results from the European firms that they studied.

The demand factor was one of the most effected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Around 93% of the MSMEs reported decreases in their demand. Of the micro and small enterprises 93% and of the medium enterprises 100% had experienced reduced demand for their good and services. The reduced demand is owed to the fact that during the pandemic, multiple times lock downs were imposed. During that time period the people avoided going out unnecessarily which resulted in their considerably reduced demands. Aftab et al. (2021) reported the demand factor to be the second most affected (72%) dimension of the SMEs operations. Only 3% of the participants of this study reported an increase in the demand for their goods and services. These businesses might be related to the trade of necessary items, such as food and medicine, which remained operational during the lockdowns. Aftab et al. (2021) also had 13% respondents that reported higher demand during the pandemic.

The MSMEs in Quetta faced declines orders (64.8%), their ability to deliver orders decreased considerably (30%), and their ability to meet deadlines was also compromised (24%). Also, most of the MSMEs in Quetta had their day-to-day operations disrupted because of the lockdowns imposed by the government. During the lockdowns the businesses and large marketplaces could not run as usual and the citizens’ movements were restricted as well. About 90.2% of the participants reported to have closed their business activities during the lockdowns imposed by the government. Different studies conducted in Pakistan and around the world conveyed similar results for example in the study of Aftab et al. (2021) most of the participants of their study (96%) had stopped their operations because of the government mandated lockdowns. Similar results were obtained by Shafi et al., (2020).

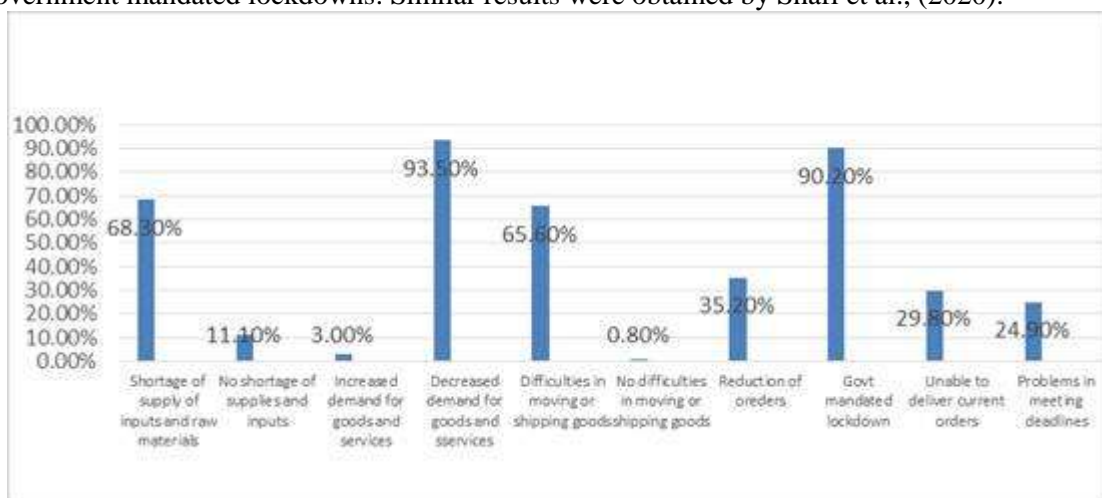


Figure 1 Impact on Operations

The financial impact of the Covid-19 on the MSMEs:

According to research conducted by the Harvard business school, the pandemic resulted in severe financial vulnerabilities in the small businesses (Bartik et al., 2020). In the study of Shafi et al., (2020) the financial problems were the most reported problem i.e., around 68%. Similar results were obtained in this study. This study also examined several variables to determine the financial impact of the pandemic on MSMEs of Quetta (Figure 2). The results reveal that around 96% of the MSMEs experienced decreases in their cash flows. A closer look reveals that all of the medium enterprises and 96% of the micro and small enterprises had liquidity issues. Only 3% of the respondents reported increased cash flows, which might have been businesses that did not cease to operate during the lockdowns.

Among other financial problems 65% MSMEs were unable to pay loans, 66.4% were unable to pay salaries and wages to their workers. Around 57% businesses were unable to pay their utility bills, and 78% businesses reported increased fixed costs. Around 62% MSMEs were unable to pay rents. The cross tabulations of these businesses revealed the micro and small businesses to have been less liquid than medium enterprises. Which means that Micro and small enterprises had bigger financial issues than medium enterprises. The severity of the financial issues of these firms is rather alarming. Ratnasingam et al. (2020) found the Malaysian SMEs to have had conspicuous financial problems. Shafi et al. (2020) discovered that many of the SMEs they studied had plans to shut down their businesses in order to deal with the liquidity problems. Lastly, about 23% firms in this study could not get new loans. whereas, only 15% could not get extensions on loans they had previously obtained.

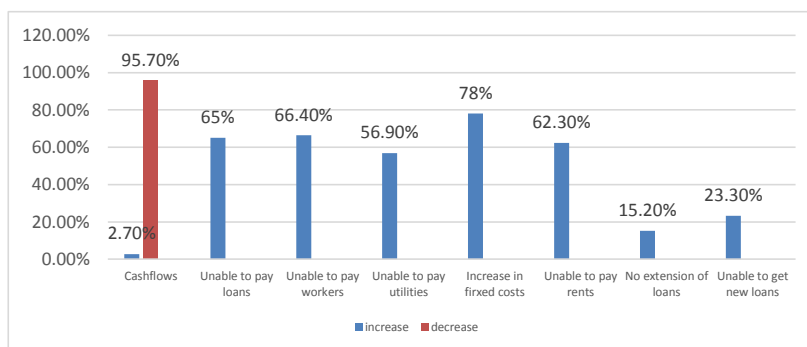


Figure 2 Impact on Finances

The impact of the Covid-9 on the sales and profitability of MSMEs:

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was also examined on the sales and profitability of the MSMEs in Quetta (Figure 3). A significant 95% of the MSMEs reported decreased sales turnover and profitability. Only 2.2% reported increased sales and profits. The cross tabulations revealed that 100% of the medium enterprises reported decreased sales and profitability. While the 2.2% that reported increases in their sales and profitability were all micro and small enterprises. These businesses were probably dealing with daily staple items, such as food and medicine, which had increased sales during the pandemic. According to Aftab et al. (2021) around 88% of their respondents reported degenerated sales, 3% reported improved sales turnover, which according to them may have dealt in medical devices or other essential items. In this study only around 3% of the MSMEs had continued levels of sales and profits as before the pandemic. In the study of Aftab et al. (2021) 9% of their respondents reported similar conditions while 83% of the participants of their study experienced debilitated profits because of little commercial action during the strong waves of the pandemic.

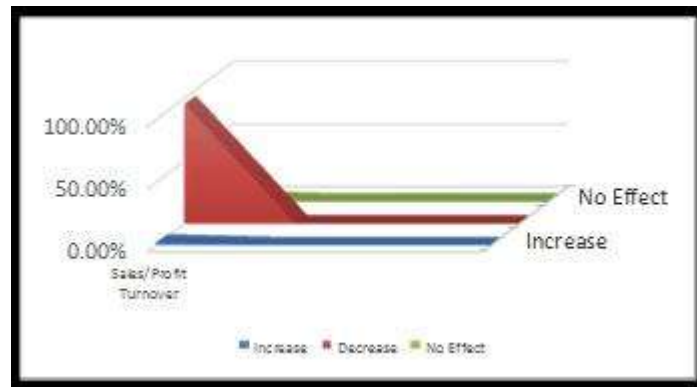


Figure 3 Impact on Profit and Sales

The measures used by the MSMEs to encounter the impact of the Covid-19:

In order to deal with the operational and financial impacts of the pandemic the MSMEs of Quetta adopted several measures. Around 60% MSMEs had borrowed from banks, companies, or individuals. Half of the medium enterprises and 61% of the small and micro enterprises reported to have borrowed money. Around 69% MSMEs had negotiated with their lenders to get more loans or extended the payback time of the loans they had already availed. Only 31% businesses were able to reduce their costs. Most of the MSMEs did not reduce their costs during the pandemic i.e., 67% of the micro and small enterprises had costs piling up. Most of the micro and small businesses (95%) and medium businesses (92%) did not outsource their orders. Which may have been caused by their lack of understanding and experience in outsourcing practices. Only 24% of the MSMEs reported to have delayed their deliveries in order to deal effectively with the consequences of the pandemic (Figure 4).

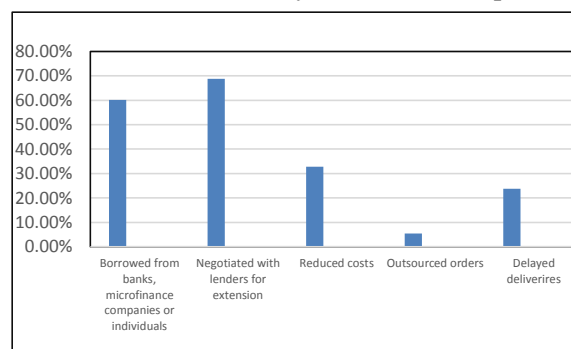


Figure 4 Financial Measures

Only one business in the micro and small business category hired additional employees. Which indicates that during the tough time of the pandemic almost all of the businesses could not afford to hire employees. Around 98% MSMEs did not increase the work hours of their employees. Many MSMEs i.e., 68% reduced either employees or their work hours. In the study of Aftab et al. (2021) Approximately 71% of the MSMEs had reduced either their staff or their working hours. Sareen (2020) reported that firms had vehemently sanctioned the strategy of dismissals with opposing circumstances on their business processes because of the pandemic.

Many MSMEs i.e., 78% sent their employees on leave with or without pay. Around 77% micro and small firms and 83% of medium enterprises included in this study stated to have done so. Similar results were reported by Aftab et al. (2021) i.e., 82% of their respondents sent their staff on leave of absence with or without paying. In this study, only 1.7% businesses had increased the salaries and wages of their employees. This may be due to fact that the MSMEs were in a severe financial crunch, as seen in the previous section. Some businesses i.e., 29% reduced their employees' salaries or wages (Figure 5). While in the study of Aftab et al. (2021) more than half of their respondents i.e., 54% reduced the remunerations of their employees. Similarly, in the study of Shafi et al. (2020) 43% of the small businesses either laid off their employees or decreased the salaries, and wages of their

employees. According to the study of Bartik et al. (2020) numerous small businesses briefly shut down and fired their staff in the first few months of the pandemic.

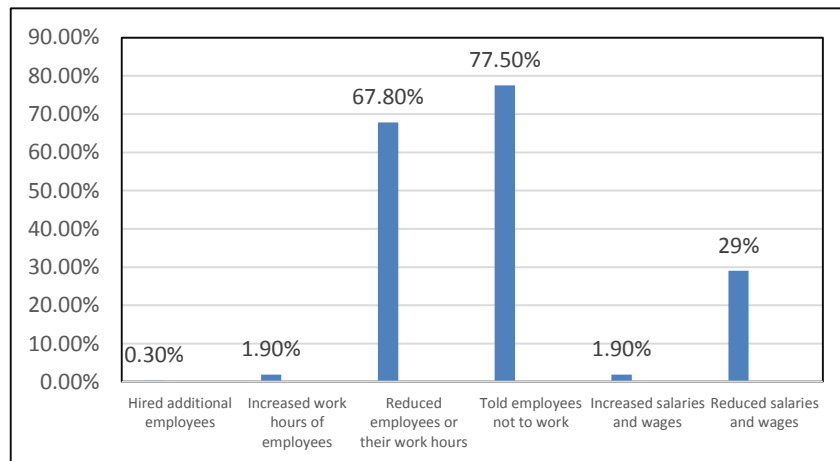


Figure 5 Measures used by MSMEs in terms of employees and employment

Of those firms that asked their employees not to work a significant 66% either fully or partially paid their employees. Around 14% did not pay them at all, while 20% did not ask their employees to not work (Figure 6). Whereas in the study of Aftab et al. (2021) 91% businesses did not pay the employees they had asked not to work.

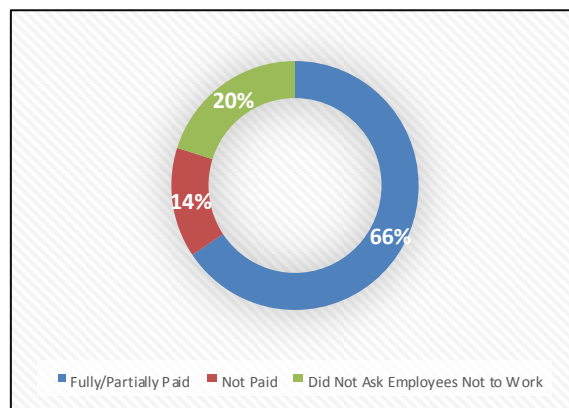


Figure 6 Payment of employees on Leave

During the pandemic organizations in different the world enabled their employees to work remotely from home. However, in Quetta Only 10 businesses or 2.7% of the enterprises allowed telework. Whereas, 2 businesses did not allow telework. Of the MSMEs 7% did not have telework options available before or after the pandemic. A huge number of the firms i.e., 89% reported that telework is not suitable for their businesses (Figure 7). In the study of Aftab et al. (2021) a significant 77% small and medium sized firms did not let their employees work remotely from home. Absence of the right means and right business models were the major reasons for it.

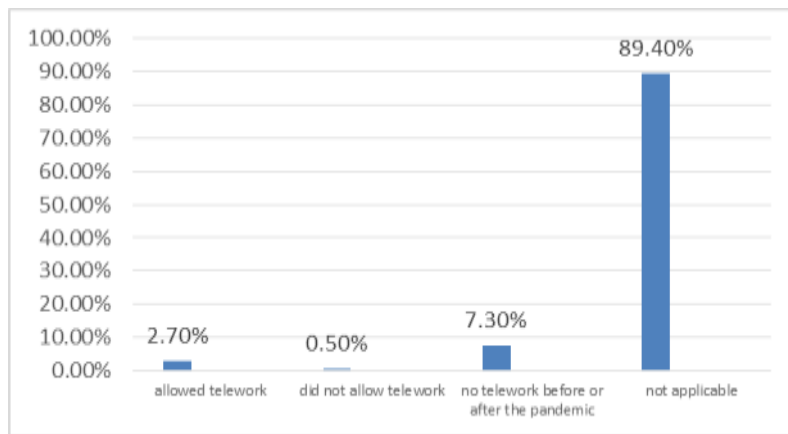


Figure 7 Telework Opportunities

Even though the pandemic posed high risks for the health of the employees, only about 34% MSMEs in this study increased the paid sick leaves of their employees. About 5% reduced the paid sick leaves of the employees, all of which were micro and small enterprises. Many of the firms i.e., 61% neither increased nor decreased the paid sick leaves (Figure 8). Mainly because most of these businesses did not have predetermined number of days that employees could take leave after being sick. Whereas, according to Aftab et al. (2021) 67% of their respondents increased the sick leaves of their staff.

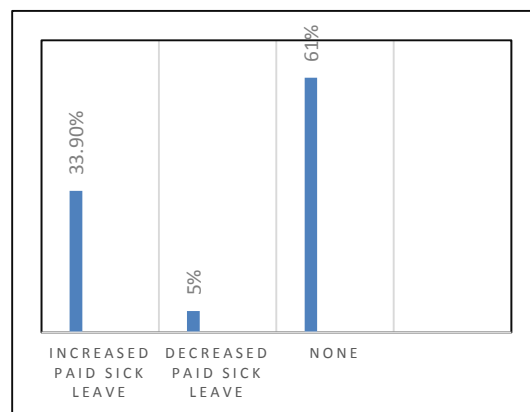


Figure 8 Paid Sick Leaves

In this study 100% of the MSMEs did not avail or receive any loans or grants from the government in order to pay their employees (Figure 9). Whereas, Aftab et al. (2021) reported that 42% of firms they studied had availed loans or received grants from the government. It can be seen from the study results of Shafi et al. (2020) that SMEs specified the need for loans, while others felt the need for subsidies.

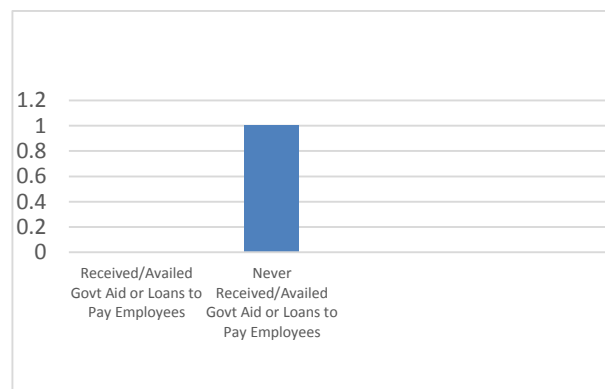


Figure 9 Received govt loans/aid to pay employees

In conclusion, this study unearthed many problems that MSMEs had come across because of the pandemic. In which, the decrease in cash flows (96%) was the most reported problem as the

MSMEs were in a financial stalemate during the pandemic. The second most reported problem was the decline in sales and profitability of the MSMEs (95%) which helps explain the shortage of cash flows the enterprises faced during the pandemic. The third and fourth most reported impacts of the pandemic were decrease in demand (93%) and closure from the lock downs imposed by the government (90%), respectively. The fifth and sixth most reported problems were sending employees on leave with or without pay (78%), increase in fixed costs (also 78%) and the shortage of supplies and inputs (68%). It was seen from the data that none of the MSMEs that were a part of this study received any loans and grants from the government.

Suggestions

The Impacts the pandemic left on the MSMEs should be a learning experience for the policy makers of the MSMEs. They should serve as a base for future plans and strategies. Such policies should be devised that the number one problem of the MSMEs i.e., disruption in operations would be avoided. Also, policies should be devised that circumvent any hindrances blocking the supply and distribution channels of MSMEs in future. The MSMEs of Quetta witnessed tight liquidity situations due to the lockdowns. There is need for policies that make the MSMEs more resistant to financial threats. Along with that there is need for such government policies that will help the MSMEs avoid bankruptcy and illiquidity i.e., subsidies to enable them to pay loans, utilities, and rent etc. there is need for making such policies that highly regard the health and wellbeing of MSMEs employees. There is also need for policies and strategies that safeguard employee rights such as timely payment of salaries and wages, reduction in layoffs, and alternate hiring prospects. Policy makers need to focus more closely on the issue of telework as it could lead to solve the major issue of operation disruption for MSMEs. practical plans and strategies may help to reduce the fixed costs of MSMEs.

Conclusion

This study examined the affects the Covid-19 pandemic had left on the MSMEs in Quetta. Several issues regarding the operation of businesses were unearthed, such as reduced demand for goods and services, hurdles in supply chains, and shut down of business operations during the lock downs etc. The MSMEs also faced financial problems due to their inability to operate as they used to before the pandemic. The results of this study also show that the MSMEs experienced reduced levels of sales and profitability. It was seen that because of their tough financial conditions the MSMEs in Quetta took out loans or extended already availed loans. In turn the MSMEs shifted their employment needs and cut salaries and wages of their staff. Many of the MSMEs could not have their employees work remotely from home. Whereas, none of the MSMEs availed any help from the government. Several suggestions were given to policy makers for future action. But regardless of the time, energy, and resources spent on this study, there are several gaps that this work was unable to fulfill. There is need for wider spread research that may take into account more MSMEs form all the different sectors operating in Quetta, such as agriculture sector which was not considered in this study. Along with that, thorough researches can be carried out encompassing MSMEs from different districts of Balochistan, to see the impact the pandemic left on them. Such researches along with others may be able to provide greater insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the different MSME sectors of the Pakistani economy.

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