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COVID-19 VACCINE HESITANCY IN PAKISTAN

Analysing vaccine hesitancy in
Pakistan: Trends from Gallup Pakistan's
Coronavirus Attitude Tracker Survey data

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Despite efforts from the government to procure COVID-19 vaccinations, vaccine hesitancy could pose a serious barrier towards mass inoculation. As of May 2021, Pakistan has vaccinated about 1.2%¹ of its population and has just recently opened vaccinations for the 18+ age cohort. Even if the supply-side issue is resolved, there remains the grave issue of low demand for vaccines. Mass awareness is needed but for that we need to see what the root of this vaccine hesitancy is.

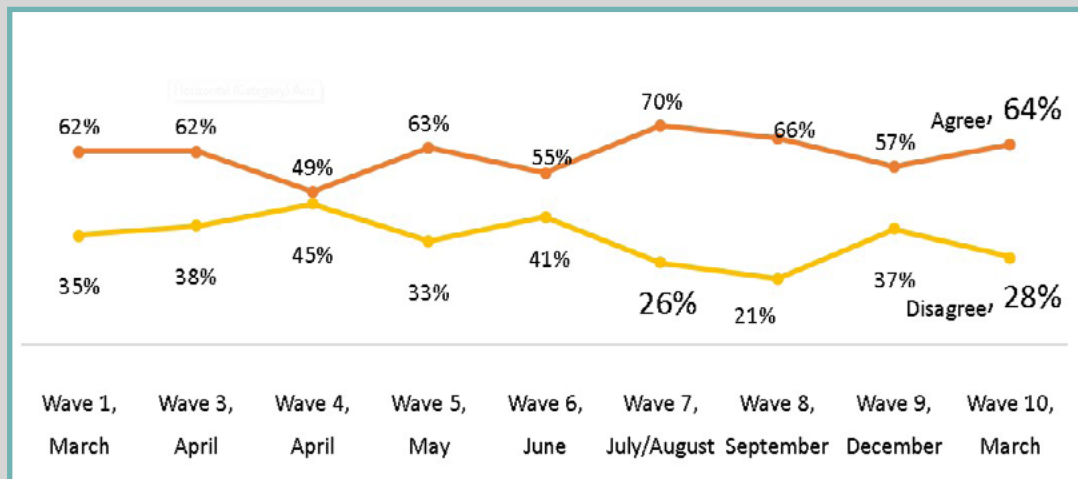
Gallup Pakistan has been conducting COVID-19 Attitude and perception tracker surveys since March 2020. So far, 10 waves have been recorded with the most recent one conducted between March 2021 and April 2021.

¹<https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/pakistan/>

First, let's see how seriously the public considers the threat from the coronavirus. The latest survey shows that 64% Pakistanis consider the COVID-19 threat to be exaggerated. During this time, Pakistan was slowly entering the third wave. The survey was conducted before the 10-day country wide lockdown imposed by the government.

QUESTION: TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE/DISAGREE THAT THE THREAT OF CORONAVIRUS IS BEING EXAGGERATED?

TREND ANALYSIS



It would also be useful to understand how public opinion has shifted since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 up till now.

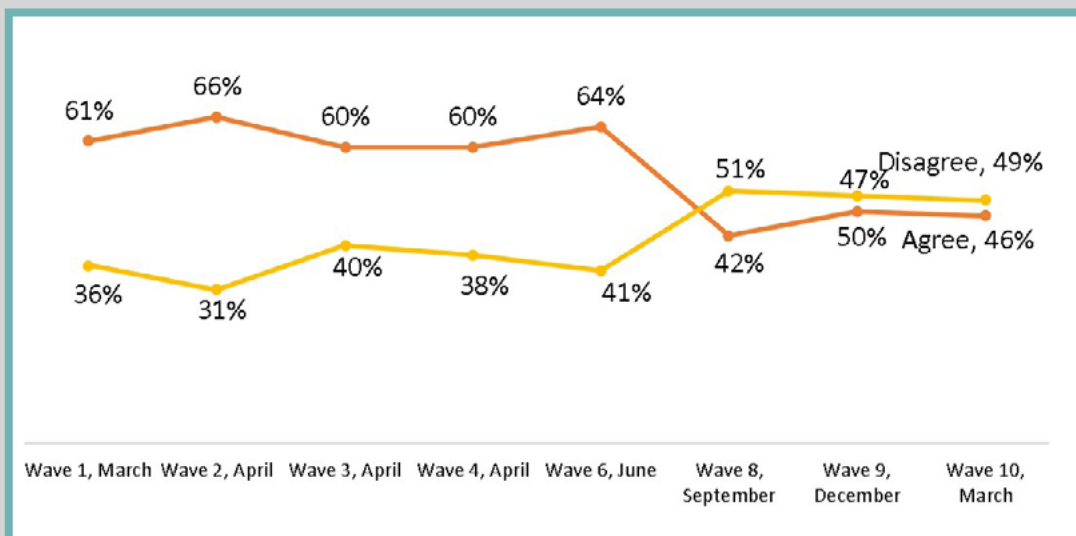
At the start of the pandemic, 62% of Pakistanis agreed that the threat from the virus was being exaggerated. This can be explained by the fact that in March, there was not much information publicly available regarding the virus which led to a lot of uncertainty. This coupled with misinformation on social media and overall slowly rising rates initially led to this belief. However, the shifts in responses to this question over the 10 waves have been astounding.

This percentage fell to 49% in April 2020 when COVID-19 cases were beginning to rise rapidly. In July/August 2020, 70% Pakistanis thought that the threat was being exaggerated. While the number of cases was slowly decreasing around this time, for 7 in 10 Pakistanis to think that the threat was being exaggerated is alarming. In the latest tracker survey conducted in March 2021, 64% people still think that the threat is exaggerated. This comes as a shock because of the onset of the third wave of the virus and an increase in the number of cases since March. With the rise in cases, the expected result was an increase in people taking this threat seriously however, this was not the case in Pakistan. India's COVID-19 crisis peaked towards the end of April so it is yet to be seen whether news from the other side of the border changes Pakistanis' response to this question about the threat of coronavirus being exaggerated.

Next, we look at Gallup Pakistan's poll about fear of contracting the virus. As Pakistan has navigated its way through the pandemic, it seems that fear of contracting the virus has seen a downward trend. Till June 2020, around 64% Pakistanis agreed that they were afraid that they or someone in their household would be infected by the virus. However, this figure declined to 42% in September 2020. After rising to 50% in December, it now stands at 46% in the latest wave of this survey. This is a worrisome trend and could lead to complacency in following SOPs.

**TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT:
"I AM AFRAID THAT MYSELF AND SOMEONE IN MY HOUSEHOLD WILL BE INFECTED BY CORONAVIRUS"**

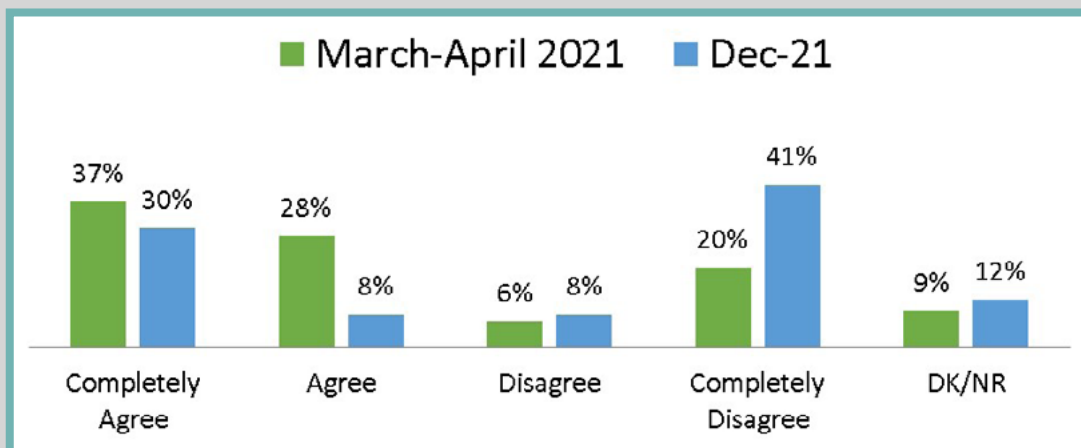
TREND ANALYSIS



Given this context, how many Pakistanis are actually willing to get the COVID-19 vaccine? And how has this figure changed over the past few months?

As per the latest survey that was fielded in March-April 2021, 65% agreed that they would get vaccinated while 26% said that they would not. 9% were unsure. In December 2020, when the vaccination drive had not yet started but the talks of first vaccinating healthcare workers were happening, the results were different. 38% Pakistanis in December said that they were willing to get vaccinated while 49% were not. 13% were unsure.

QUESTION: KEEPING THE CORONA VIRUS IN MIND, KINDLY STATE THE EXTENT TO WHICH YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THIS STATEMENT “IF THERE IS A NEW COVID-19 VACCINE THAT IS SAFE TO USE, I WILL GET IT” DO YOU AGREE A LOT, AGREE SOMEWHAT, DISAGREE, OR DISAGREE A LOT WITH THIS?



In December 2020, 12% were unsure about their response but this has reduced to 9% indicating that slightly more people have made up their mind now. While in December, 30% said that they were very likely to get the vaccine, this has increased to 37%. Earlier on, 4 in 10 Pakistanis were very hesitant/opposed to the vaccine and it has nearly halved to 2 in 10 being very hesitant in March/April 2021. In December, there was a lot of speculation regarding vaccines however it seems that since the vaccination drives have been started, the proportion of people who were completely opposed to getting vaccinated has reduced significantly. That said, 26% still remain opposed/hesitant towards the COVID-19 vaccine.

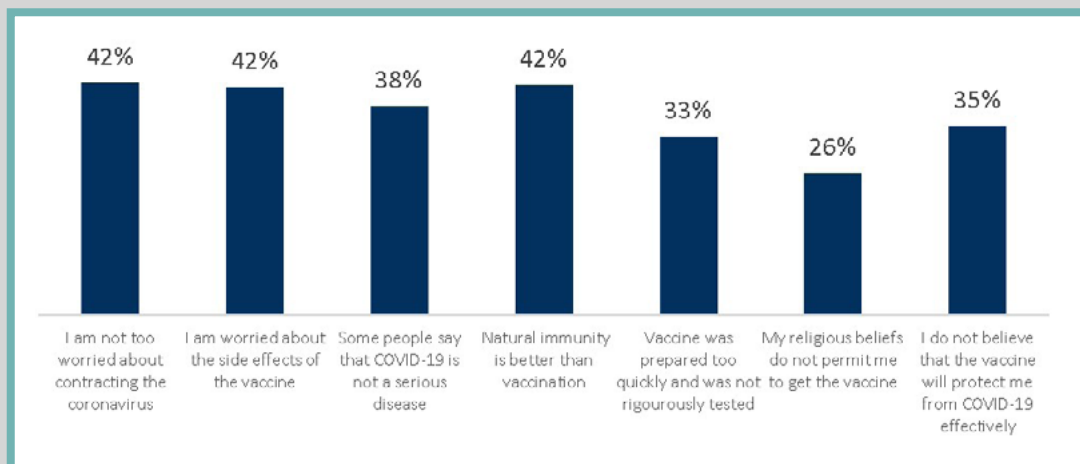
So what are the main reasons behind this vaccine hesitancy? Is there a link between vaccine hesitancy and the perception that the threat of the virus is exaggerated?

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The most common reasons for vaccine hesitancy appear to be lack of worry regarding the virus, a belief that natural immunity is better than getting vaccinated and worry about vaccine side effects. Worry about side effects was also the most common reason for vaccine hesitancy in India². [Following the 3Cs model](#) of vaccine hesitancy (Confidence, complacency and convenience), Gallup Pakistan's data reveals that the most common reasons pertain to the categories of confidence and complacency.

QUESTION: WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ANSWERS ARE YOU LIKELY TO GIVE IF YOU DO NOT PLAN ON GETTING THE COVID-19 VACCINE?



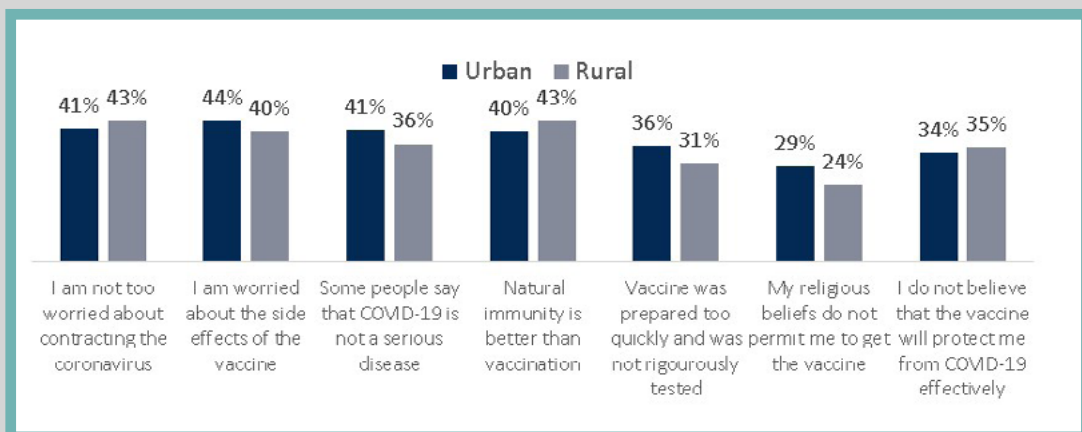
As discussed earlier, many seem to think that the threat of the virus is exaggerated and that many are not afraid that they or someone in their household would be infected. These high numbers could further lower the demand for vaccines if effective messaging is not done urgently.

²<https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/vaccine-updates/story/sixty-percent-age-indians-still-hesitant-covid-19-vaccine-survey-1762749-2021-01-26>

Overall, low perceived risk of COVID-19 leads to the assumption that vaccine is not needed; this is reflected by the 38% who cited COVID-19 not being a serious disease as a reason for refusing vaccination.

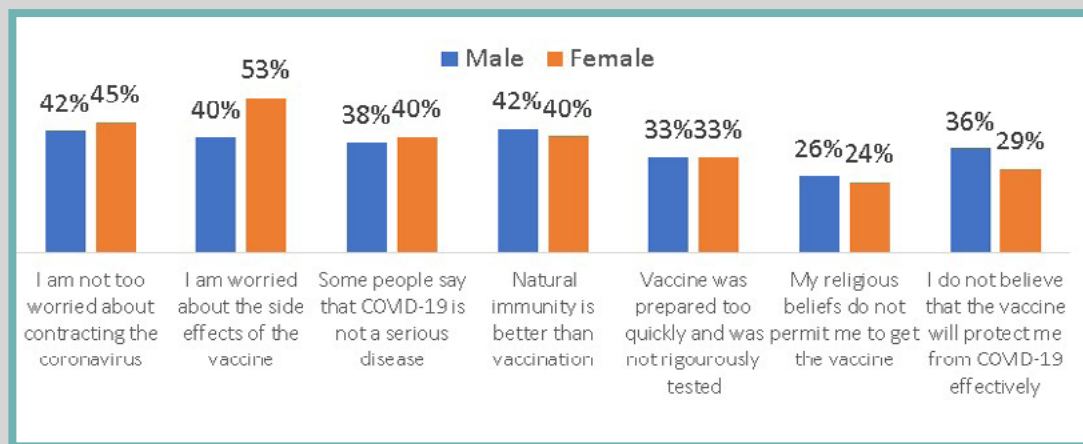
According to report by UNICEF Pakistan, 34% Pakistanis refused or were unsure about getting vaccinated. The reasons included concern about side effects (34%), wanting to wait and see (30%), desire for natural immunity (16%), belief that the vaccine is ineffective (12%) and a belief that COVID-19 is not a serious risk (8%). These surveys were conducted between August 2020 and February 2021 and comparing them to Gallup's recent survey, it seems that some fears and concerns have been amplified.

Let's disaggregate the data and see if the reasons for vaccine hesitancy differ among urban and rural respondents. For urban respondents, side effects of the vaccine is the most important concern while for rural respondents, lack of concern about the pandemic and belief that natural immunity is better than vaccination appear to be more common reasons for vaccine hesitancy. The numbers however do not have huge differences and overall the situation does not appear to be too different in urban and rural areas.



It might be worth looking at this issue through a gender lens. Are there differences in reasons for vaccine hesitancy between men and women in Pakistan?

Gallup Pakistan's poll results show that worry about vaccine's side effects appears to be more common among females than males. Slightly more males than females are hesitant to get the vaccine because they believe that it will not offer effective protection against the virus.

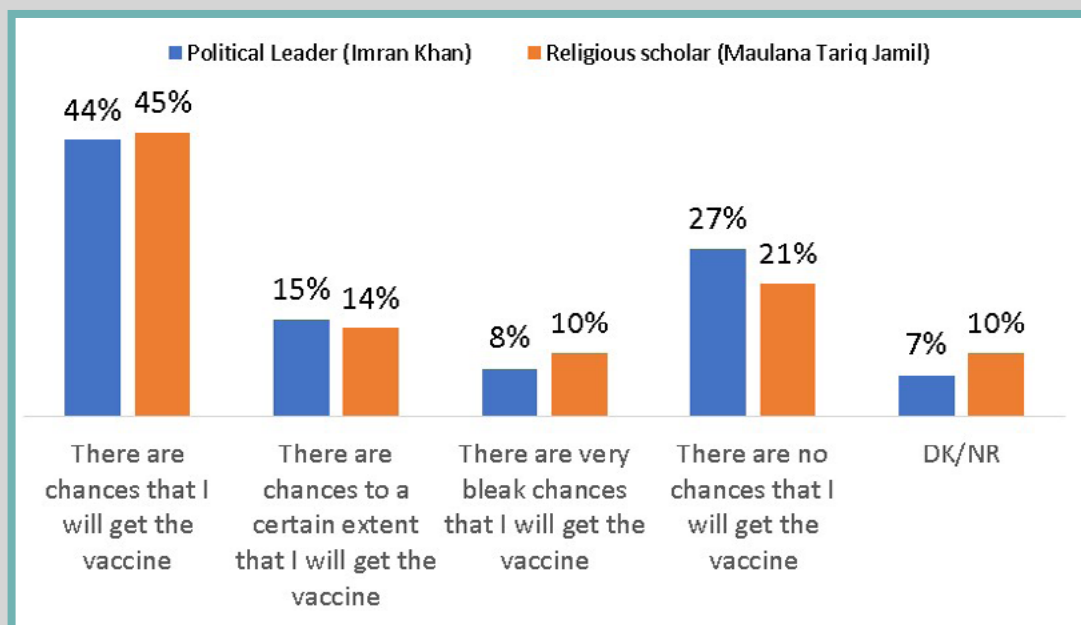


Gallup Pakistan also used some informal interventions to see if the mention of religious leaders like Maulana Tariq Jameel or political leaders like Imran Khan would help change the response of people regarding vaccines.

Absolute refusal to get the vaccine was lower when the religious scholar intervention was used as compared to the political leader intervention. More people were unsure about getting the vaccine when the religious intervention was used as compared to when the political one was used.

QUESTION: IMRAN KHAN, THE PRIME MINISTER OF PAKISTAN, HAS AFFIRMED THAT SOPS MUST BE FOLLOWED TO PREVENT CONTRACTING THE CORONA VIRUS. SOPS INCLUDE GETTING THE VACCINE. WILL YOU GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

QUESTION: MAULANA TARIQ JAMEEL, A RELIGIOUS SCHOLAR, HAS AFFIRMED THAT SOPS MUST BE FOLLOWED TO PREVENT CONTRACTING THE CORONA VIRUS. SOPS INCLUDE GETTING THE VACCINE ADMINISTERED. WILL YOU GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE?



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Clinical recommendations

In wave 9 of Gallup Pakistan's Coronavirus attitude tracker survey, respondents were asked who they trusted in terms of medical and health-related advice. 88% said medical professionals, 77% said friends and family, 58% said the federal government and 52% said the media. A report by UNICEF Pakistan also revealed that the most trusted sources of information about COVID-19 for Pakistanis were doctors and health care workers (70%), mobile phone (awareness calls and SMS) (69%), television and radio (68%), newspapers (65%), social media and government officials (61% each). 56% also cited caller waiting tune as a trusted source. Overall, Pakistanis have immense trust in doctors/health professionals. This should be kept in mind when making vaccine awareness campaigns. [Clinical recommendations](#) can be helpful in alleviating people's fears. Involving Doctors in media campaigns to promote COVID-19 vaccine can have an effect. Also, [pharmacists and pharmacy teams can help address vaccine hesitancy](#) by starting dialogue about COVID-19 vaccinations. This would include listening to patients; answering their questions; providing resources that patients can take away with them. Health professionals can promote the fact that they have been vaccinated for instance through 'I've had my COVID-19 vaccination' stickers which can start conversations and show their trust in the vaccine. Overall, bringing the medical community on board is essential as Pakistanis have expressed the most trust in them.

- Addressing the concern about side effects

As vaccine supply is being procured, vaccine demand must be amplified as well. In light of the survey results as well as additional evidence, focus should be on providing accurate information about possible side effects. Mainstream media should provide messages of reassurance that the vaccine is safe and reliable as worry about side effects is a common reason for hesitancy. Video messaging/testimonials of common, socially identifiable people as well as doctors and political/religious leads reassuring Pakistanis that there are no severe side effects and that the benefit of vaccine outweighs any risk should be broadcasted on television, radio and social media; these could be possible ways to reduce hesitancy that stems from fear of side effects. As our results showed that worry about side effects was more common among females, video testimonials of women in particular would be a step in the right direction. The government must develop targeted communication to address vaccine hesitancy and enhance uptake.

- Other concerns

Additionally, messaging should also include benefits of the vaccine and how it is different and more effective than natural immunity. This is crucial as one of the common reasons for hesitancy was the belief that natural immunity can protect people which leads to the assumption that the vaccine is unnecessary. Another concern was that the vaccine was prepared too quickly. It would be useful to reassure people that the vaccine process did not skip any steps and these vaccines have been approved by all regulatory authorities at both international and national level.

26% of those who were opposed to the vaccine cited religious reasons. [Motivational interviewing in which the focus is on empathy, trust and listening](#) is a way through which these views can be addressed. The key is to be able to shift the negative reason to oppose vaccination into an aspiration for instance convincing those who oppose for religious reasons and helping them understand that vaccination may make it possible for them to attend mosques and religious gatherings freely and that eventually, with the majority vaccinated, people will be able to form 'saffs', lines without gaps and stand shoulder to shoulder with their fellow Ummah. Religious leaders can be involved in media messaging that the vaccine is 'Halal' and permitted from religious perspective.

Overall, more communication from the government, public health officials and the healthcare sector is needed to make people realize that the threat of COVID-19 is real. Ignoring the threat, not following protective and mitigation measures, and refusing COVID-19 vaccine can lead to a huge burden in terms of morbidity and mortality in Pakistan.



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