

NETWORKS OF EMPOWERMENT: *Federal Directorate of Immunization (FDI) Female Vaccinator Programme-A Step towards Bridging the Gender Gap in COVID-19 Vaccination*

When COVID-19 cases started to spike in Pakistan during the month of May 2021, female vaccinators stepped forward for the distribution of masks to their communities. They also ran successful outreach campaigns to encourage hand washing and social distancing. These female vaccinators are familiar with the local community, which helps build trust between vaccinators and locals. Most importantly, they have an edge to access ignored parts of societies and households that are prohibited for their male counterparts.

Vaccination for COVID-19 commenced in Pakistan in February 2021. By August 2021, coverage figures revealed a small number, that only **36%** of females were vaccinated against **64%** of the male population. It was pointed out by the Field intelligence that females were reluctant to go to the COVID Vaccination Centers for vaccination. There were numerous reasons for females not getting vaccinated that included Vaccine hesitancy, Inaccessibility, non-availability of males to accompany them to the COVID Vaccine Centers, Lack of relevant and important information, Technology Gap, Fear of side effects, particularly among pregnant and lactating women, and Cultural norm (females did not want to get inoculated by male vaccinators).

Consequently, the Federal Directorate for Immunization (FDI), under its prodigious leadership and directions along with UNICEF, undertook the initiative of hiring female vaccinators. In consultation with Provincial EPI Departments, these were placed in the most conservative districts to encourage females to come forward and get vaccinated. And also to reach out to the marginalized women. Around **100** female vaccinators were hired in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and **100** in Baluchistan as well, through a third party on merit. Initially, for a period of 6 months, that was from September 2021 to Feb 2022.

These were skilled workers e.g., qualified vaccinators, retired health workers, or nurses. 80 years old Gul Bibi who got vaccinated is a true depiction of the FDI Initiative.



A Female Vaccinator from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Results were phenomenal only after six months. Female Vaccination coverage in Baluchistan was **110,037** including second dose and booster shots subsequently. Similarly, Female Vaccination coverage in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was **757,555** respectively.

Reducing Gender Disparity in August 2021, the COVID Vaccination coverage for females was **36%**. In February 2022, this coverage reached **40%**. And **45%** among females aged between **60-65** years.

Conferring to the United Nations Development Program Gender Inequality Index, Pakistan is ranked [145th out of 146 countries](#). Significantly, women have very few job projections. Therefore, the female vaccinator platform not only offers employment opportunities but empowers women for freedom, and an infrequent chance to inspire community decision-making as well.

The COVID-19 Female Vaccinator Model of the Federal Directorate for Immunization (FDI) not only overcomes issues of gender discrimination but has proven to be Pakistan's Lady Health Worker successful model. That should be simulated across the world as countries continue the fight against COVID-19.