

## The Role of Religious Leaders in EPI Programme: *How the Muslim Scholars are going an extra mile to promote Immunization and shaping opinions by addressing misconceptions*

The Glorious Quran says in Surah 5 verse 32 **"if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind"**, the reference was given by the humane, energetic and passionate Imam Masjid Hazrat Baba Shah Jamal Darbar, Molana Akhtar Raza in Lahore during an In-depth Interview (IDI) with Dr. Tabinda Zaffar, Coordinator Expanded Programme Immunization (EPI) representing the Federal Directorate of Immunization (FDI).

Immunization has been one of the most effective public health interventions in preventing and controlling infectious diseases. However, despite the proven benefits, vaccination coverage rates can still be uneven in various communities and regions. In this context, religious leaders have emerged as influential figures who can play a significant role in promoting immunization and overcoming vaccine hesitancy.

That is, where the power of Religious Leaders comes into play, hence the joint vision of Dr. Muhammad Ahmad Kazi, DG, FDI and Dr. Mukhtar Ahmed Awan, Director Health Services, EPI Punjab, considers that Religious leaders hold a position of authority and trust within their respective communities. They are looked upon as moral guides and sources of information on various aspects of life, including health. This moral authority can be leveraged to encourage their followers to make informed decisions about their health, including getting vaccinated.

In line with the vision, Mr. Sajjad Hafeez Comms FP from EPI Punjab arranged a session of Dr. Tabinda Zaffar, EPI Coordinator, FDI with Molana Akhtar Raza.

The interview took place on the day of Friday after the Jumma Prayers and Dr. Zaffar was happily amazed pre-interview to hear the Jumma Khutba as Molana Sahib incorporated many points on immunization related information in his talks. Later in the interview Molana Akhtar Raza enlightened the FDI Representative with the following practice based piece of information: -

**Dispelling Myths and Misinformation;** Misinformation and myths about vaccines can spread quickly. Religious Leaders play their role in this regard by addressing concerns and debunking myths.



The Imam Masjid, Molana Akhtar Raza and Dr. Tabinda Zaffar in Mosque's Alley

**Incorporating Immunization into Religious Teachings;** Religious leaders integrate the concept of immunization into their teachings. This approach not only enhances the credibility of immunization but also fosters a sense of community responsibility.

**Community Engagement and Mobilization;** Religious institutions are deeply connected to their communities. During gatherings, events, and community service initiatives Religious Leaders raise awareness about immunization.

**Addressing Cultural and Religious Concerns;** a Religious Leaders bridge the gap between healthcare providers and community members by addressing concerns by offering guidance that aligns with religious values resulting in receptive immunization attitudes.

**Leading by Example;** Religious Leaders in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa demonstrate their commitment to the health and well-being of their communities by first vaccinating their children and themselves. The visible endorsement create a positive ripple effect that encourages widespread vaccine acceptance.

The interview end note stated that collaborative efforts between EPI and religious communities create a synergy that leads to higher vaccination rates with a stronger and healthier and wealthier Pakistan. Dr. Tabinda on behalf of FDI expressed a gesture of gratitude to all scholars.