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Socio-Political Dynamics and Role of Media in countering Polio in Pakistan- challenges and a way forward

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Abstract

This paper provides the readers with a better understanding of dynamics of polio virus in Pakistan over the last five years (2020-2025). It gives a brief introduction of the fatal disease and then analyses the socio-political model of the country that hinders the influence that media can have on masses regarding information related to polio because of which we are stuck in this issue for decades. The research sheds light on how polio is being politicized in Pakistan and various challenges faced by the frontline health workers for almost three decades. It highlights the role of women as they are a source of success of these polio campaigns launched across the country. As it is mixed research, the methodology adopted comprises of both surveys and interviews. Moreover, lessons for Pakistan and better ways to tackle with polio are discussed at the end that can help in future policy making regarding polio.

Key Words:

Introduction

As of the year 2023, out of the two countries in the world that are still struggling with eradicating polio, Pakistan is one, along with the neighbouring Afghanistan. Though Pakistan has come a long way, yet it is still trying to combat this deadly disease. Poliomyelitis, commonly known as polio is considered to be an endemic viral infection. Polio eradication program faces immense challenges in Pakistan, including misinformation on social media that has resulted in an increased number of polio cases in the recent years, when viral misleading videos were shared online. This has played a critical role in shifting the masses' attitude on polio vaccine acceptance in Pakistan. Misinformation on social media marked a turning point in information consumption habits of Pakistanis and the content moderation policies of social



media platforms, as well as the relationship between the government of Pakistan and platforms like Facebook, Google, and Twitter.

Polio is considered to be as dangerous as terrorism in Pakistan and the country faces hurdles in overcoming both. Poliomyelitis (polio) is a highly infectious viral disease that spreads from person to person, predominantly through fecal-oral transmission or, less commonly, from droplets of an infected person or by a common vehicle such as contaminated water or food. While most cases of polio are asymptomatic, the virus can cause paralysis or death. It mainly affects children under five years of age. Fecal-oral transmission is the most common source of transmission of the poliovirus in developing countries, including Pakistan. In addition to the poor health and water sanitation infrastructure, the transmission of the virus is also heightened because of the high population density and climate conditions. Pakistan has been fighting with this fatal disease for many decades. We have lost many precious lives on the way of this struggle.

The country is facing hurdles in tackling both polio and terrorism. Polio is considered as dangerous as terrorism. In the year 2023, three children have been paralyzed by polio in Pakistan, while 20 cases were reported from Pakistan in 2022 after an outbreak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Pakistan started its Polio Eradication Initiative (PEI) in 1994 and went on to carry out polio campaigns over the next two decades. A characteristic factor is Pakistan's isolated subpopulations with persistent polio that benefit little from high immunity among the surrounding population and continue behaving as a reservoir of the wild polio virus (WPV1). Moreover, places in Pakistan continue to have inadequate sewerage systems and have grappled with terrorism for a long time. The former facilitates the survival of the poliovirus in the environment while the latter often turns a health problem into a security issue.

Currently, the dilemma is that socio-political dynamics of the country tries to eradicate polio but at the same time, hinders the influence that media can have on masses regarding information related to polio due to which we are stuck in this issue for decades making our children more vulnerable to this life-threatening disease. The intermingled politics of the state do not allow it to have implementation on the way forward for eliminating polio. Both print and electronic media gives heed and pays attention to this matter, but the intricacies and inherent flaws in the social and political framework of Pakistan makes it difficult for the societies to overcome this problem from the past thirty years.

Impact of media on masses

♣ Electronic media

Mass media in Pakistan spreads a big chunk of information regarding polio. Households that have access to print and electronic media have a much better understanding and are well aware about the data that is there on the media. Different studies show that television has a greater impact than radio. Rural areas in Pakistan have a large number unvaccinated children than urban due to absence of television and other sources of information. Proper designing and delivery of powerful media messages at proper time can create awareness about polio, change behaviour and attitude for polio vaccination.

♣ Social Media Strategy

Social media is also playing a crucial role to make efforts for eradication of polio all over the nation. The social media strategy is based on repositioning polio eradication as a national public cause for the protection of children. It aims to make endpolio.com.pk Pakistan's top-rated and most trusted source of information on polio. The strategy is supported by the endpolio.com.pk website and involves social media monitoring, content generation, and the involvement of influencers

♣ Difference of perceptions

The widespread misinformation regarding polio is impacting the masses at a great level. A common person in Pakistan has a very different mindset regarding this disease as compared to a learned person. There is a huge chunk of population that considers the polio vaccine as something that should be avoided at any cost. Due to this, the polio campaigns go useless and polio workers face a big backlash and even in some cases, have to become a victim of harassment by people. The imprudence of parents and their refusal to allow vaccinations for polio is similar to pushing their kids in a deep pit. This eventually results in paving way for a general opinion that polio vaccines are causing polio instead of curing. Masses tend to follow this idea blindly and at the end, it's the victims of polio who suffer the most.

♣ Media's efforts

Different campaigns for polio awareness have been organized by the government. Media being an important pillar of the state takes its responsibility in this case. Efforts to eradicate this disease are clearly seen at the hands of electronic media. Public service advertisements have been used to counter misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and religious fatalism in both traditional and new media. Television advertisements and ads during commercial breaks of radio programs are a proof that promote the idea that 'polio is a crippling disease that cannot be cured, so getting vaccinations is the only way to prevent it'.

Politicization of polio

The politicization of the polio virus and socio-political dynamics of polio in Pakistan is a multifaceted issue. It involves various factors including:

- Security challenges
- Misinformation
- Local resistance to vaccination efforts
- Geo-political issues
- Public health strategies
- Impact of political transitions

The country's polio eradication program has faced international scrutiny due to its role as a significant driver of global wild poliovirus transmission. Conflict and insecurity in certain regions have hampered vaccination efforts, leading to outbreaks and challenges in eradicating the virus. Additionally, there have been instances of misinformation and resistance to vaccination, which have led to controversies and even protests against polio vaccination campaigns. Furthermore, the government has introduced controversial measures, such as the threat of imprisoning parents for not vaccinating their children against polio, which has further fuelled the politicization of the issue. These factors have contributed to the complex and challenging environment surrounding the efforts to eradicate polio in Pakistan.

The persistence of polio in Pakistan is attributed to various challenges, including sociocultural conditions, knowledge gaps, and the spread of conspiracy theories about polio vaccines. Creating awareness among the masses is crucial to get rid of polio. Mass media, especially electronic media, is essential during outbreaks like polio in Pakistan, as it helps people get information about the disease and the importance of vaccination. The impact of awareness campaigns is evident in India, where the government, along with other stakeholders, including the media, employed more than 2.5 million health workers to successfully eradicate polio. The media can also play a role in improving public and private partnerships and expanding the reach of polio eradication efforts.

♣ Political transition:

Polio virus gets politicized like many other issues in Pakistan. After each political transition, polio cases spike. After general elections in 2013, the number of polio cases rose to 306 in 2014 before dropping to 54 in 2015, 20 in 2016, and only eight in 2017. In 2018, another election year, cases again rose to 12. Within the first six months of 2019, 32 cases of polio have been recorded across the country, which also has left a question mark on the performance of newly formed government. "Pakistan, its political transition, and polio cases go in the same direction, an upward direction. Due to the transition, a chaotic environment develops," says Dr. Rana Safdar, former National Emergency Operations Coordinator of the Polio Eradication Program in Pakistan. Bureaucrats and health officials are often transferred to new postings. As a result,

the polio program suffers. Owing to COVID-19 in the year 2020, the EOC paused polio campaigns from March till August.

As of August 2022, there were 14 wild poliovirus type 1 (WVP1) cases in the country. This represents a significant increase from 2021, where Pakistan had one case of WVP1 and eight cases of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 cases (cVDPV2) throughout the year. In the year 2023, a little improvement has been witnessed. There have been four polio cases reported so far. Still, Pakistan has been criticized for its uncommitted attitude toward eradicating the polio virus once and for all. The International Health Regulations Emergency Committee of the WHO recently warned in 2022 that Pakistan's polio eradication program is no longer on track.

Complex challenges creating barriers

♣ *Migration:*

Some populations in Pakistan, such as nomadic groups, who migrate due to economic or seasonal causes, are at greater risk of contracting polio. In addition, conflict and insecurity pose other challenges, both for safety of frontline health workers and also for the local population, who are more likely to be displaced, and thereby more difficult to track.

♣ *Hard areas like KPK:*

The tribal areas, which were semi-autonomous and formerly known as Federally Administered Tribal Areas, are now part of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, located in the north-western region, along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. "It's these very difficult tribal areas where there is a lot of political and social insecurity, complexity, and that's where we found that we are discovering lots of unvaccinated children," Kiran shared her experience when she went to KPK with the polio vaccine team.

♣ *Lack of proper sanitation:*

A large number of areas in the country also lack important water and sanitation infrastructure, resulting in a breeding ground for viruses. Poor sanitation is one of the leading causes of spreading of this virus. Children were frequently missed during polio vaccination visits and were not followed up with at a later time. In a 2021 study in Pakistan, "38% of children were not vaccinated with OPV," and the most frequent reason given was "the unavailability of children at home during polio vaccinator visits".

♣ *National Extremism*

The barriers are also deeply linked with the religious extremism in Pakistan and sometimes to global political interests. The Government of Pakistan has managed the issues by involving

social mobilisers and religious leaders and by deploying police officials to ensure the smooth running of the vaccination programmes. However, the emergence of 53 new polio cases in the country between January and August, 2019, which is more cases than in past 3 years, has led to calls for additional stringent measures to cope with the situation in the years ahead. It has become vital to make the programs work on the right track.

♣ **Conspiracy theories:**

In addition, myths and conspiracy theories about the vaccine are rampant in some regions, leading people to believe in weird myths. Even today, many educated people would say that the polio vaccine is a Western intervention to sterilize the population. Another myth is that due to its composition, taking the vaccine is haram, meaning it is forbidden for Muslims by Islamic law. This leads to anti-polio vaccination propaganda which is quite problematic in the longer run.

♣ **Challenges for healthcare workers:**

Frontline health workers in Pakistan routinely face safety risks including harassment and attacks. In June 2022, a polio worker and two officers were shot dead during a polio vaccination campaign in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Earlier in the year, a female polio worker was killed, and an officer providing security for health workers was also murdered in separate incidents. While interviewing one of the polio healthcare workers in Rawalpindi, it came to light that there is a great need to create awareness in the contemporary times. “We are trying to convince people to get vaccines for their children in the year 2023 who have mindsets of probably 1823”, Kiran told. Many educated people refuse to get vaccines just because of their strong beliefs in the rumours regarding the vaccine.

♣ **Vulnerability of female health workers:**

Both male and female health workers face various challenges when it comes to campaigns and vaccination programs, however, women health activists and health workers are more likely to experience routine harassment and assault than their male counterparts. Women health workers are routinely harassed for anything from being young to being a widow. In addition to facing backlash from community members, women health workers also sometimes face harassment from male supervisors. Due to a lack of motivation by health workers and pressure to meet targets, some frontline health workers intentionally misreport data about the number of households they visited or vaccinations they have administered, making it difficult to ensure every child in Pakistan is vaccinated against polio. This becomes a big problem when calculating the statistics that whether children of a particular family have been actually vaccinated or not.

These challenges underscore the complex environment in which polio healthcare workers operate, requiring comprehensive strategies to overcome them and achieve eradication.

Role of women in dealing with polio

Women health workers are key to the success of polio campaigns because they have access to households in a way that men do not. In Pakistani culture, it is unlikely that a male health worker would be allowed into a home by a woman. Women are therefore more receptive to allowing other women to enter their homes to verify the number of children in the household and their vaccination records. “Sometimes we are offered with food too from women of different households”, Kiran shared.

Talking particularly about the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the conservative culture doesn’t allow women to open doors of the house when bell rings. In this case, many men refuse to talk to polio health workers on opening up the door. It becomes a big challenge for male health workers to convince males to listen and understand the importance of vaccine. As a result, female health workers proved to be quite successful with their good convincing power.

Moreover, having more compassionate and polite attitude towards kids, women handle the crying kids more easily than men. It’s hard for male health workers to make children stop crying or to keep them busy in some other stuff while giving the vaccine and marking the finger nails to keep a record of vaccinations.

Lessons for Pakistan

While tackling polio in the context of Pakistan is complex due to political, cultural, and other issues, strengthening polio surveillance systems and ensuring high vaccination coverage through strict check and balance is the key. Pakistan’s polio health care system should consider the footsteps of those states who had fought with polio virus in the past and are now completely polio-free zones of the world. The polio vaccine, given multiple times, can protect a child for his whole life. More than 20 million people are able to walk today who would otherwise have been paralysed, since 1988, when the Global Polio Eradication Initiative was launched.

♣ *Fruitful usage of foreign aid*

Whatever foreign aid Pakistan gets from the friendly states, it is a need of the hour that it must be used in the most suitable way at the targeted area. The Government of Japan extended its support to the Pakistan Polio Eradication Programme by providing more than US\$ 3.87 million as a grant in the year 2022. The grant will be used for the procurement of essential oral polio vaccine, which will reach more than 18.61 million under five years old children in Pakistan living in endemic and outbreak districts.

♣ **Strict implementation of WHO recommendations**

Children in Pakistan are given more doses than the number actually recommended by WHO, which is raising concerns in the general public because of their poor awareness of the need for booster doses in the tropical areas of the country. Additionally, conspiracy rumours exist about the mishandling of the vaccines during storage and transportation and about the side-effects of the vaccine. In a single incident in 2019, hundreds of children were rushed to hospital with complaints of abdominal pain, vomiting, and fainting following polio vaccination, and angry protesters burnt down a health-care facility in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The government did manage the matter at the moment by arresting the key conspirator involved in rumour spreading. However, the incident resulted in mistrust among many parents who otherwise were opposed to the fear-based propaganda against polio vaccination. Avoidance of the vaccination by the public because of a lack of awareness is far more dangerous in the eradication of polio than dealing with the smaller fractions involved in anti-polio vaccination propaganda.

♣ **Strengthening healthcare sector**

Though it is rare in Pakistan, but some victims of polio end up facing lifetime impairment. There is no cure for paralytic polio and no specific treatment. Physical or occupational therapy can help with arm or leg weakness caused by polio and might improve long-term outcomes, especially if implemented early in the course of illness. Healthcare sector needs to improve this particular aspect in order to save lives.

♣ **Mass communication strategies**

Gaining support from influential public figures and the use of mass communication strategies can be employed to reduce vaccine refusal rates and improve health communication. Efforts should be made to ensure that the media does not unwittingly pick up and disseminate rumours, and to respond to rumours and misinformation without amplifying the wrong messages

Future measures for effective anti-polio vaccination and to resolve the mistrust held by the general public in Pakistan must include an explanation by polio health officials about the higher number of doses of vaccination and the side-effects of vaccines. Information provided by WHO about the need for multiple vaccine doses for children in the tropics, where the weather is hot, must be shared with health-care units and with the officials involved in anti-polio vaccination. Health officials should provide an exclusive and logical explanation to people with having staunch belief on myths regarding the vaccine. When prioritising approaches to win the war against polio, increasing public awareness about the benefits of vaccination should be considered of utmost importance.

Currently, the research areas include optimizing oral polio vaccine efficacy for the general use. Developing affordable inactivated polio vaccine and managing risks associated with vaccine-derived polioviruses and vaccine-associated paralytic polio (including OPV cessation) antivirals.

Recommendations

For many other health concerns, it is always said that prevention is better than cure. In case of polio, no cure exists, so prevention is the only way out! Regular immunization with proper check and balance is the way forward.

♣ R&D Sector

Improving R&D productivity is crucial to ensuring the future viability of the pharmaceutical industry and advances in health care. Research and Development (R&D) sector can help by priority management, preserving data integrity, and through risk-based quality management.

♣ Political Commitment

There is a dire need for political commitment by the particular leadership and accountability for the work done by associated people from the healthcare sector. Proper monitoring of the tasks should be there to ensure the effectiveness of all the counter efforts against polio virus.

♣ Usage of OPV instead of IPV

Using OPV (Oral Polio Vaccine) instead of IPV (Inactivated Polio Vaccine) can prove to be beneficial while fighting with the virus. The inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) was available first, given as a shot, in 1955. A more convenient form, called oral polio vaccine (OPV), was given as liquid drops via the mouth. It was developed in 1961. OPV was recommended for use in the United States for almost 40 years, from 1963 until 2000. In case of Pakistan, it has been used and proved fruitful. But due to lack of accountability and provincial disparities, IPV is used in some parts of KPK. We need to counter this by ensuring the usage of OPV in all parts of Pakistan equally.

♣ Cross-border collaboration

As only two countries are struggling with polio, that are neighbours. So, cross-border collaboration with Afghanistan can prove to be fruitful for both countries. But analysing the current dynamics when almost 1.7 million Afghan refugees are being sent back to Afghanistan, it is not hard to predict that there is a very little or no possibility of the two states to collaborate for this matter.

♣ Engagement of local users by public figures

It is suggested that instead of relying on national-level information, Pakistan's provincial and local health departments should engage with local users on social media to correct vaccine misinformation about polio and that polio vaccine acceptance can be improved using risk communication strategies. They can collaborate with public figures, not celebrities, who interact with public on social media platforms and has a power to influence because people actually listen to them.

♣ **Utilizing the power of digital media**

Creating awareness through digital media in the age of technology is one of the easiest ways to tackle with this virus. Almost 35% of population of Pakistan is an active social-media user, whereas a greater chunk has access to social media. This provides an easy-going platform to a big proportion of population to be aware of whatever the current dynamics of polio are, what is right and wrong, and how to prevent the virus effectively.

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