



High-Level Virtual Dialogue

Gender and immunization: from polio to COVID-19

6 May 2021

10:00 - 11:15 am NY

Applying the lessons of polio immunization programs to position women as immunization champions for COVID-19 and other vaccines

Overview

Gender is one of the most important factors in determining the success of large-scale immunization, particularly for the last mile. This virtual session will review progress and results related to gender sensitivity in major vaccine campaigns, looking at the experience of polio and early indicators from COVID-19. Co-hosted by the United Nations Foundation, Global Polio Eradication Initiative, and Permanent Missions of the United Kingdom and United Arab Emirates to the UN in New York, the session considers gender from the perspective of both frontline care workers and recipients of vaccines, providing first-hand perspectives and evidence from the field. Permanent Representatives, agency officials, and mission experts are then invited to identify key actions this year to ensure gender-sensitive vaccine work, especially in light of the context of the COVAX facility and the restart of many pandemic-suspended or hindered immunization efforts for other diseases.

Context

World leaders have pledged to make COVID-19 immunization a public good, facilitating universal access to this vital frontline defence against the pandemic. Women comprise 70% of the global healthcare workforce. Within the context of immunization campaigns, women are indispensable, administering vaccines, running education campaigns, and connecting communities to health services. Women are crucial to both the successful design and uptake immunization programs, building trust with communities and addressing reservations about vaccine safety to promote vaccine acceptance. As healthcare professionals and community leaders, women play a significant role in determining norms around vaccine acceptance and uptake. Women's influence on vaccine rates is no less great within the household. Women are often the primary healthcare seekers within households.

Despite their widely acknowledged importance to immunization programs, women face significant barriers on both the supply and demand sides of vaccines. Frontline vaccinators also face routine harassment and stigma, particularly in insecure settings subject to violent and targeted attacks. Although

1. [Year of the Health and Care Worker 2021: Facts on health and care workers](#) (WHO)

men face some of these risks too, the burden falls disproportionately on women. Women are also more likely to suffer economic and social hardships amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women seeking vaccines for themselves or their family face a different set of challenges. They may have limited mobility to reach vaccination sites located outside their communities, and they sometimes lack access to capital to pay for travel or services, or access to information on health services. Women often bear greater responsibilities for home and care work that prevent them from leaving the house to seek immunization services. In some communities, they may also face social restrictions. Women who are working in the informal sector may not be able to sacrifice earnings to take time off to get vaccinated.

Gender inequity is not new to delivering or receiving health services, and tools exist to meet the challenges of the present situation. Along with partners like the Immunization Agenda 2030 and Gavi, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) has pioneered and is working to implement gender-responsive approaches to address long-standing and recurring problems in areas affected by polio. From spearheading vaccine development in labs to leading community immunization campaigns and [championing gender equality](#), women are driving progress in every aspect of polio eradication. GPEI's Gender Strategy 2019-2023 recognizes that the gender of the vaccinator and the caregiver are significant determinants of vaccination coverage in communities. The polio program is striving to address challenges facing women by differentiating strategies to reach diverse populations; bringing vaccination campaigns directly to communities to limit travel time; partnering with women's organizations to deliver accurate and timely information; ensuring gender balance at all levels of the program; and disaggregating data by sex to get a full picture of vaccine coverage.

Further action is urgently needed by the global community if we are to support these women, finish the job on polio and COVID-19 and fully leverage existing health infrastructure to serve broader purposes. By prioritizing gender-sensitive, responsive and even transformative vaccination strategies now, and fully supporting existing efforts (like polio eradication), countries will ensure faster and fairer delivery as COVID-19 vaccines are made available at scale.

Guiding questions for participants

- How is your organization assessing and reporting on gender as a factor in immunization? What have been the successes and challenges?
- What are solutions at the field level to improving vaccination outcomes for women and girls? How are these solutions then turned into standard operating procedure?
- What are the most effective kinds of support to female immunization workers so that they can continue their work?
- What incentives and accountability tools drive implementing agencies to mainstream and prioritize gender? What are the disincentives?
- What messages from Member States and donors to implementing agencies are most effective at encouraging gender sensitization?

Agenda

Moderator: Rustam Haydarov, Senior Communication Manager, UNICEF

10:00 to 10:15 Welcoming remarks

- Amb. Lana Nusseibeh, Permanent Representative of the UAE to the UN and Assistant Minister for Political Affairs, UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
- Amb. Jonathan Allen, Deputy Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the UN
- Amb. Sofia Borges, Senior Vice President and Head of NY Office, UN Foundation
- Video on immunization work in the field

10:15-10:45 Panel discussion

- Dr. Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director of EMRO and Polio Gender Champion
- Dr. Sagri Singh, Senior Adviser on Gender Equality, UNICEF
- Dr. Sebastian Taylor, Head of Global Operations, Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health, UK and member of Technical Advisory Group, Afghanistan
- Jean Munro, Senior Manager for Gender Equality, Gavi

10:45-10:46 Video message from frontline worker

10:46-11:10 Moderated discussion

- Interventions from participants

11:10-11:15 Closing call to action

- Wendy Morton, Minister for European Neighborhood and the Americas, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, UK

Registration

Delegates may register <https://forms.gle/JooLEpvn9RsPPd77> to receive the meeting link.