

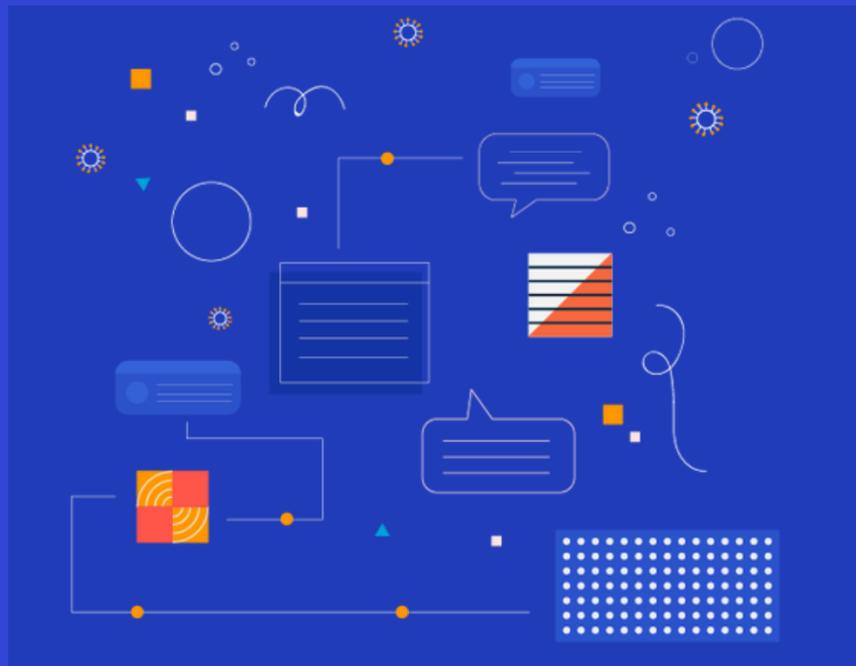


COVID-19 and Health Rumors

Afghanistan Humanitarian Bulletin #1, 2022 (February)

2 key themes

- Vaccine side effects: do COVID-19 vaccines cause death or infertility?
- Vaccine efficacy: do COVID-19 vaccines prevent infection?

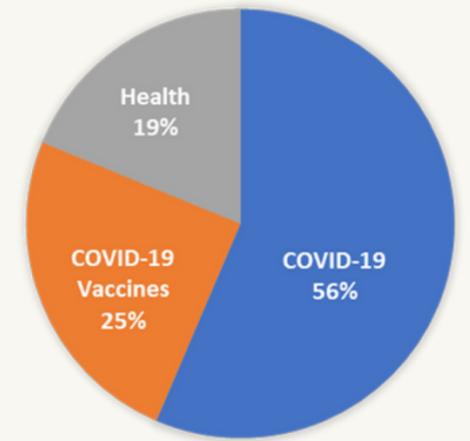


This is Rooted in Trust

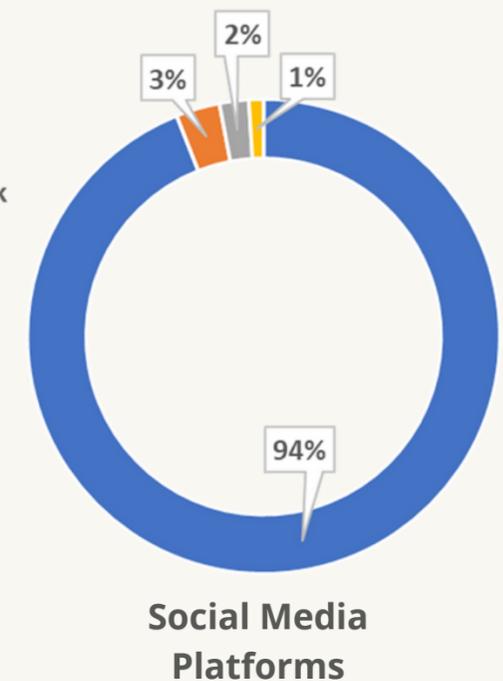
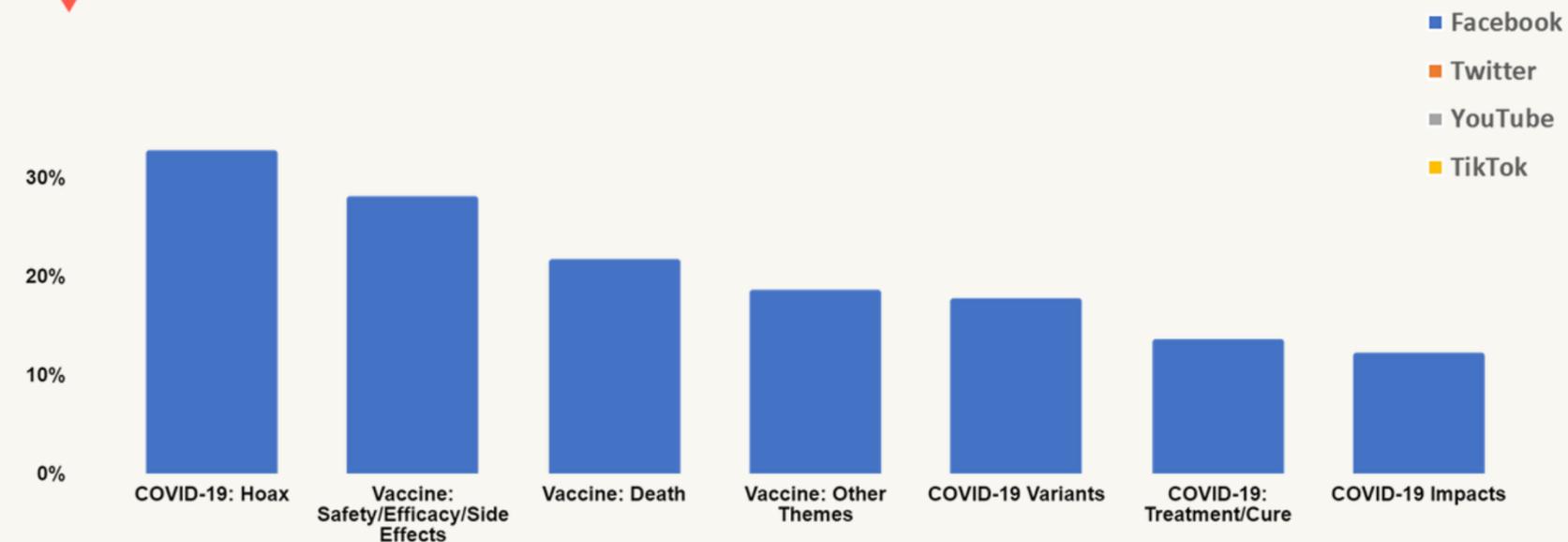
Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a USAID BHA-funded project run by Internews to support humanitarian, public health agencies and local media to combat and manage the spread of rumors and misinformation about COVID-19. This regular collection of community insights aims to provide humanitarian and public health agencies ideas to integrate and align their risk communication activities with community perspectives and provide information according to the needs to the community. In Afghanistan, Internews is collaborating with local media partners and the Risk Communication and Community Engagement Sub-Working Group (RCCE SWG).

The rumors highlighted in this bulletin were collected by Internews, Dari, Pashto and English, from public and private social media spaces during the month of January 2022. Overall, Internews identified a total of 129 rumors from Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and YouTube.

Rumor analysis is based on a thematic risk assessment that accounts for the frequency of the discussion or social media engagements and its potential impact on the community. In this issue we focus on rumors trending about COVID-19 vaccines as the numbers of cases of COVID-19 in Afghanistan were growing in January 2022 and vaccine campaigns were ramped up. We also collected rumors relating to Health and the Health system, and in future bulletins we will include examples of these.



129 rumors collected



COVID-19 AND COVID-19 VACCINES TOP SUB-THEMES

COVID-19 snapshot

February 2022*



 **173,047**
cases

 **4,907,058**
One dose

 **4,231,984**
2 doses total

COVID-19 Info events

News, events & announcements that may impact online discourse in January

- 1 National media reported that at least 21 of 36 COVID-19 care centers closed throughout the country in the past six months due to financial problems.
- 2 Confirmed cases increased at an alarming rate in January 2022 with 170% increases in cases in weeks 3 and 4.
- 3 The national EPI unit made announcements on Facebook reminding the public of the threat COVID-19 poses, and the availability of vaccines in all 34 provinces to anyone over 18.
- 4 The Afghan health sector requests support from WHO to access testing kits.

*Total figures as of February 25, 2022

01.

Example:

“ If you do not want to become infertile or die a horrible death, and if you want to have a flawless generation, don't get the COVID-19 vaccine...” ”



“ I have shared documents and references about COVID-19, COVID-19 vaccination, changing the DNA, turning people into zombies and killing billions of people, but some people still ask if they should get the vaccine or not? ... anyone who vaccinates, one dose or 100 doses, vaccines from any company or any country, will make no difference. All will lead to horrible death...” ”



Spread in Dari through Facebook pages



COVID-19 Vaccines and fertility

What's behind the rumor?

In January, a key trend seen in Afghan social media discussions were concerns about possible side effects of COVID-19 vaccines. In particular, our data showed an increase in discussions about whether vaccines may cause infertility. These rumors circulated on all four platforms monitored, in particular through Facebook groups and pages, which are a rich source of misinformation. This rumor is not new and has circulated in many other contexts around the world - even before the approval of COVID-19 vaccines in 2021. And while in Afghanistan, this rumor is often linked to the conspiracy theory that the West is using the vaccine as a covert tool of population control in Muslim countries, this rumor is also prominent in countries with other dominant religions.

In Afghanistan, these rumors have also sometimes been interlinked with a fear of zombies and other supernatural phenomena. Zombies have become well-known throughout the younger demographic who enjoy movies and play video games.



Fact check

Pregnant women are more at risk of severe COVID-19 disease and in order to protect themselves and their babies women are encouraged to get vaccinated even while pregnant where it is available. ([UK Health Security Agency](#))



There is no scientific evidence that vaccines interfere with fertility, either in men or women. Vaccines stimulate an immune response against the protein or antigen of that virus. In case of COVID, vaccines stimulate antibody response and cell-mediated immune response against the spike of SARS-CoV-2 virus. ([WHO](#))

"COVID-19 viral vector vaccines use a modified version of a different virus (a vector virus) to deliver important instructions to our cells... COVID-19 [viral vector vaccines](#) [such as those being offered in Afghanistan] cannot give someone the virus that causes COVID-19 or other viruses...They do not affect or interact with our DNA in any way....The spike protein doesn't last long in the body." ([CDC](#))

COVID-19 vaccines are safe and will help you protect against developing severe disease and dying from COVID-19. ([WHO](#)). After getting the vaccine people have reported mild to moderate side effects for the first few days of being vaccinated, but not everyone will experience any side effects. Typical side effects include pain at the injection site, fever, headache, muscle pain, chills, and diarrhea. ([WHO](#)).

Why does it matter?

- This rumor has the potential to encourage women in particular to avoid vaccination. Women in Afghanistan already face significant barriers accessing healthcare and this rumour may further decrease trust in healthcare professionals.
- Women who are pregnant or were recently pregnant are at increased risk for severe illness with COVID-19. Severe illness means that you might need to be hospitalized, have intensive care or be placed on a ventilator to help with breathing.
- The rumor may discourage people in general from getting vaccinated. This increases the risk of the getting severely sick and/or dying and the spread to vulnerable members of the community.
- More COVID-19 variants may emerge when many people remain unvaccinated.

Why does it stick?

The rumor is strongly intertwined with cultural sensitivities and religious beliefs in Afghanistan. Women who cannot bear children face intense stigma. In some parts of Afghanistan, infertile women are shunned, deprived of their inheritance, sent back to their parents, ostracized or have their marriage terminated.

Rumors have a unique power, because they play on our fear, uncertainty and entrenched bias and encourage us to act before thinking. [Studies have found](#) that when a rumor produces a strong emotional reaction, such as disgust, fear or anger, humans are not only far more likely to believe the misinformation, but to actively spread the misinformation.

Other reasons why this rumor is particularly prevalent may vary among vulnerable groups and this merits further investigation to design effective and targeted engagement on the issue.

Content you can use

- ➔ [Does the COVID-19 Vaccine Affect Fertility?](#)
- ➔ [COVID-19 vaccines do not cause infertility.](#)
- ➔ [The spike protein from COVID-19 virus or vaccine doesn't cause infertility](#)
- ➔ [COVID-19 vaccines for people who would like to have a baby.](#)
- ➔ [COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy: 12 Things You Need to Know](#)

Recommendations



- Humanitarian and health workers should collaborate with community and religious leaders to raise awareness about the benefits and risks of COVID-19 vaccines. In Afghanistan's traditional society religious and community leaders play a vital role in driving people's decision-making.
- Work with influential women and women's organizations to increase awareness about the risk of COVID-19 for pregnant women, and create space for open engagement with women to discuss their concerns about vaccines and share accurate and locally relevant information about vaccines and fertility.
- Support with media organizations to disseminate information about positive impact of COVID-19 through traditional and digital media channels. Sharing stories of women who have been vaccinated and faced no adverse impact on their fertility could increase confidence. Encourage life call-in programs that connect local health professionals with the community to openly answer their questions and concerns.
- Support community health workers to lead the engagement activities about vaccines in their local communities. According to Internews' Information Ecosystem Assessment of 2021, CHW's are by far the most trusted provider of health-related information (much more than national health authorities or international NGO's).

02.

Example:

“ Before taking COVID-19 vaccine, I was fine. I even met two people who were infected with COVID-19. But now after getting COVID vaccine, I am infected with COVID-19.”



COVID-19 vaccine efficacy

Spread in Pashto through Facebook pages



What's behind the rumor?

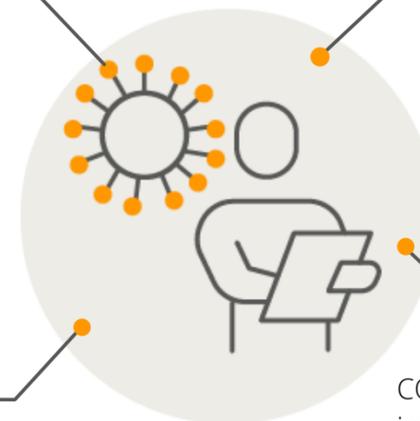
In data analysed, we recognised a trend of social media users either questioning the efficacy of the vaccine, or questioning whether the vaccine itself was the source of their infection. This kind of rumor accounted for 28% of total rumors for the month. These statements have been further amplified after being shared by influential people such as the example above which was a comment to a post by a well-known Pashto singer, Mir Khan Moqori - the son of famous Afghan poet and singer, Abdullah Moqori. Given the following of the singer, which is more than 99,000, and the more than 1000 engagements with the post, this comment - one of 58 - has the potential to reach a large audience.

There is already significant distrust towards COVID-19 vaccines in Afghanistan and the repetition of such statements from information influencers, based on personal experience, risks a further erosion of trust.



Fact check

None of the COVID-19 vaccines which are currently approved contain the live virus that causes COVID-19, which means that vaccines cannot give you the virus or make you transmit to others. ([Oxford Vaccine Group](#))



It is common to have some mild symptoms after receiving the vaccine, which is a sign that the vaccine is working, and your immune system is responding accordingly. Although, it is also important to remember not having symptoms does not mean the vaccine is not working. ([WHO](#))

No available COVID-19 vaccine provides 100% protection against contracting COVID-19. This means you can still be infected, even after taking all the recommended doses. However, vaccines DO significantly reduce your chances of becoming seriously ill, hospitalized or dying from COVID-19. If a fully vaccinated person contracts COVID-19 they are likely to experience milder symptoms. ([WHO](#))

COVID-19 vaccines don't work immediately as the body requires some time to build immunity against the virus that causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2). Therefore, if the vaccines have not had enough time to build protection in a body, a person can be infected with COVID-19 just before, or just after receiving the vaccine. ([WHO](#))

Why does it matter?

- Rumors connected to this piece of information risk further eroding trust or confidence in the COVID-19 vaccines.
- This statement will put a stamp on the rumors saying that the vaccines cause getting infected by the virus and has serious side effects.

Why does it stick?

The statement was a comment against a post of well known and influential Pashto singer, where he had encouraged fans to get vaccinated. This comment may negatively influence the belief of his fans and followers and then flow to the wider community. This misconception is also particularly 'sticky' as it has an element of truth to it. Vaccinated people can in fact still contract COVID-19 and it may seem logical to the community to then question the efficacy of the vaccine, or to suggest that the vaccine was the source of the virus itself.

Recommendations



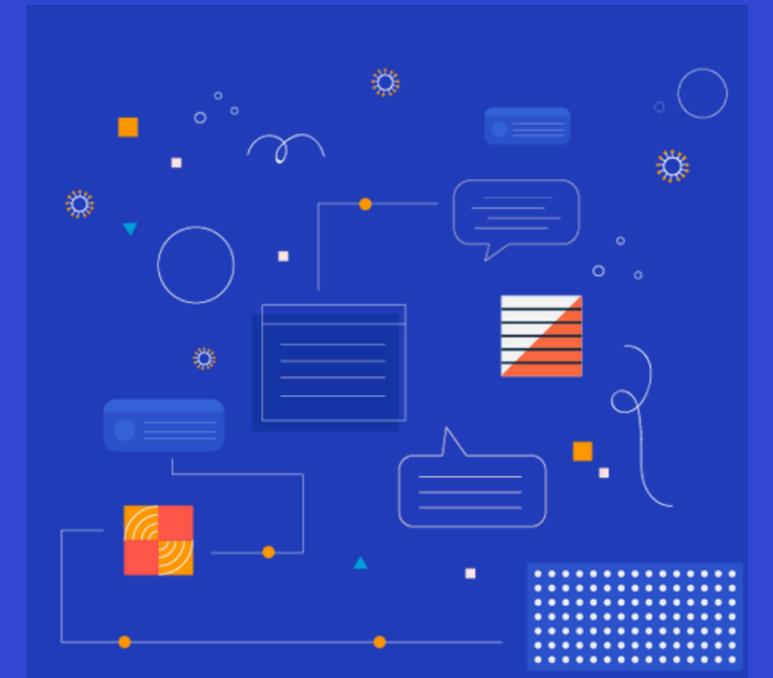
- Communication and engagement activities with the community must go beyond the promotion of the vaccine, to answering community questions about how these vaccines work, how reliable they are and the impact of waning efficacy. This will benefit current vaccination campaigns, and help the community understand why they may need to be vaccinated again in the future.
- Engage with influential artists to help them understand the role of vaccines, COVID-19 preventative measures and empower them to play a positive and informative role in the public health response.
- Explain the waning effects of the COVID-19 vaccines in relation to other vaccines and health treatments the community may be already familiar with. Using familiar comparisons to explain complex health and science issues can make these topics more accessible to people with varying levels of health knowledge.
- Peoples reasons for distrusting the vaccine can be varied: avoid homogenous communication campaigns and create open channels where people can raise questions and concerns about the vaccine and have their individual concerns adressed.



Want to give us feedback, get involved, or share data? We love to chat!

Contact:

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- Rooted in Trust is collecting, analyzing and responding to rumors in 10 countries with generous support from USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA). We focus on equipping journalists and humanitarian communicators with the tools they need, in the languages they prefer, to combat rumors and misinformation in the COVID-19 crisis.

