

## Sudan - Humanitarian Rumor Bulletin #3 - February/March 2023

### ► Special Edition: COVID-19 Vaccines and Reproductive Health Rumors



A listening group in Zalingei, Central Darfur State

### COVID-19 Situation in Sudan, February 2023

As of 21 February 2023, the official COVID-19 statistics rose to **63,787 confirmed cases** with **5,011 deaths**. As of 20 February 2023, **12,579,213** persons were vaccinated with at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, with **10,540,038** being fully vaccinated, which is over **20%** of Sudan's population. Logistical challenges, economic decline, insecurity, and misinformation increase vaccine hesitancy and remain impediments to vaccine uptake in Sudan.

## About this Edition's Rumors

This edition of the humanitarian rumor bulletin focuses on reproductive health and infant health concerns that are flagged mostly by women in private women groups on Facebook, and men and women during face-to-face listening groups with people affected by conflict and displacement in **Al-Gedaref, Kassala, Red Sea, Blue Nile, South Kordofan, East Darfur, West Darfur, Central Darfur, North Darfur, and South Darfur States**. This community feedback is the product of a collection of COVID-19 rumors identified by the Sudan team, as part of the Rooted in Trust project.

This bulletin is based on an analysis of **248** rumors out of a total of **4,807** rumors, highlighting the harmful effects of the vaccine on fertility and reproductive health, between 17 January 2022 and 31 January 2023. These rumors were collected during listening groups and from social media sources most commonly used in Sudan (*Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram*), and were selected through a risk analysis that identifies misinformation with the highest risk and potential impact on vulnerable people, which are the target communities of the **Rooted in Trust Sudan project**. In this bulletin, we focus on rumors and community feedback regarding **COVID-19 vaccines' impacts on fertility, masculinity, babies, and pregnant and lactating women**.

## Rumor #1

- ▶ **"I took the first dose and I was breastfeeding and my baby got sick to death, why doesn't Egypt vaccinate pregnant and lactating women and those who are about to get married? In the beginning, why did the organization say it is unsafe for pregnant and lactating women?"**  
**Woman - Age: unknown - Facebook**
- ▶ **"Breastfeeding and pregnant women do not take the vaccine"**  
**Woman - 26-35 - Damazine, Blue Nile (IDP Camp)**
- ▶ **"The injection causes deformities in the fetus"**  
**Woman - 36-45 - Assalaya, East Darfur**

### What's behind this rumor?

Before the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine in Sudan in March 2021, Internews data analysts observed rumors and misinformation circulating regarding the safety of vaccines for pregnant and lactating women, and their babies. These types of rumors have been spreading widely in the country, like in other parts of the world, questioning the safety of the vaccines.

Family is treasured in Sudan, and babies are loved and cherished by their parents and the larger community. Being pregnant or a new mother is a special moment in a woman's life and keeping babies healthy during pregnancy and after birth is of utmost importance. The COVID-19 vaccines are seen as a novel treatment, and many are skeptical about their safety. There have been testimonies on social media and from first-hand sources in the community, speaking of pregnant and lactating women choosing to delay a COVID-19 vaccination until they've delivered and have weaned their baby. Some healthcare workers also perpetuate these types of misconceptions about the vaccine and have advised pregnant and lactating women against seeking a COVID-19 vaccination. Adding to that, some people in Sudan mistrust medical treatments and prefer to rely on natural remedies whenever possible.

## Why is this important?

A vacuum in vaccine information catered towards pregnant and lactating women before the launch of COVID-19 vaccines has allowed for these types of rumors to spread widely. Pregnant and lactating women are generally overlooked in pharmaceutical studies, which shows a gender bias. Even in high-income countries where the COVID-19 vaccines were first launched, doctors were cautious to make public statements about vaccine safety and effectiveness for pregnant and lactating women. But with increasing hospital admissions of pregnant women experiencing severe illness due to COVID-19, doctors began to encourage pregnant women to get vaccinated, because the vaccines can save both the mother and baby's lives. This void in information about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine for these women allows for misinterpretation and circulation of rumors. Internews sentiment analysis of these types of rumors exudes feelings of fear, increasing vaccine hesitancy amongst pregnant and lactating women.



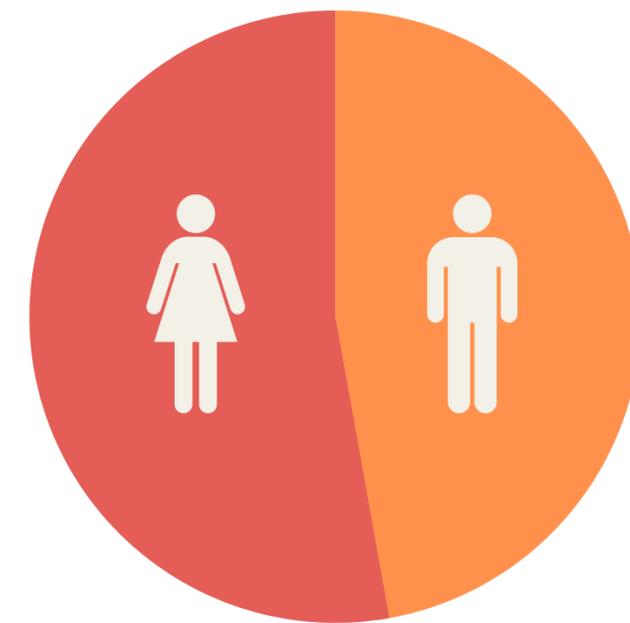
## Facts

You can get seriously sick from COVID-19 if you are pregnant or were recently pregnant, compared to others, with an additional increased risk of complications and hospitalization during pregnancy.

**Dr. Tasneem Tajelsir, former COVAX National Consultant for Adverse Events Following Immunization at the Ministry of Health,** concludes: “There are no reported cases of babies being born with birth defects because of the vaccine.”

**Dr. Yagoub Mohamed Abdelmagid, Consultant of Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Fertility at the Nile Center for Fertility in Khartoum 2,** recommends that all women – pregnant, lactating, and at childbearing age — take the vaccine. He explains that vaccines can protect the mother and baby during pregnancy, and after birth because it helps build antibodies that protect the mother and baby.

**The WHO recommends that pregnant women get vaccinated,** supported by the growing fact that pregnant women in many countries around the world have now received COVID-19 vaccines, and no safety concerns have been identified related to their pregnancies or the health of their babies. **WHO’s Dr. Soumya Swaminathan advises women who are either breastfeeding or who are planning to get pregnant to get vaccinated.**



**Vaccine and Fertility Rumors by Gender**

*Internews and its partners collected 248 rumors from January 2022 to January 2023, highlighting the vaccine effects on fertility and reproductive health.*

## Rumor #2

- ▶ **"It causes infertility for women in marriage age"**  
Woman – 15-18 – Baw, Blue Nile (IDP Camp)
- ▶ **"The vaccine, they said, is not good (for men - it causes infertility) that is why we were afraid of it. Corona is less dangerous than the vaccine"**  
Man – 26-35 – Damazine, Blue Nile (IDP Camp)

### What's behind this rumor?

In June 2021, a community health worker that participated in an Internews Rapid Rumor Response WhatsApp Training, noted lower vaccination rates amongst healthcare workers in North Darfur due to a prominent misconception that vaccines cause infertility. These rumors may have impacted the vaccine uptake amongst healthcare workers in Sudan during the early stages of the vaccination campaign. In 2021, the Ministry of Health also noted lower vaccination rates amongst women in comparison to men in eastern Sudan.



A listening group in Derieg internally displaced people's camp in South Darfur State

## Why is this important?

Mistrust of the vaccines and belief in the infertility myth are also related to the newness of the COVID-19 vaccine. In Darfur, healthcare workers observed that men were particularly resistant to getting vaccinated. One healthcare worker noted that one man reported he was not afraid of dying, but if the vaccines impact fertility that would be a real problem. Reports of couples facing challenges in conceiving have been blamed on the vaccines. Dr. Muna Abdel Aziz, UK-based Public Health Director of Sudanese origins, explains "The vaccines are regarded as a novel medicine, and thus could be seen as a foreign thing that is being injected into the human body."

It is crucial to also speak about the burden women carry when it comes to starting a family in many societies like Sudan. Community members may discourage women from taking the vaccine because anything that could impact their chances of conceiving—even if these so-called risks are nonverified accounts or rumors—is enough to dissuade women from seeking COVID-19 vaccinations. Dr. Abdel Aziz explains that allegations are easy, while evidence-based medicine takes time. By the time doctors and health authorities began to publicly debunk rumors about the negative effects of COVID-19 vaccinations on reproductive health, these types of rumors had spread widely.



## Facts



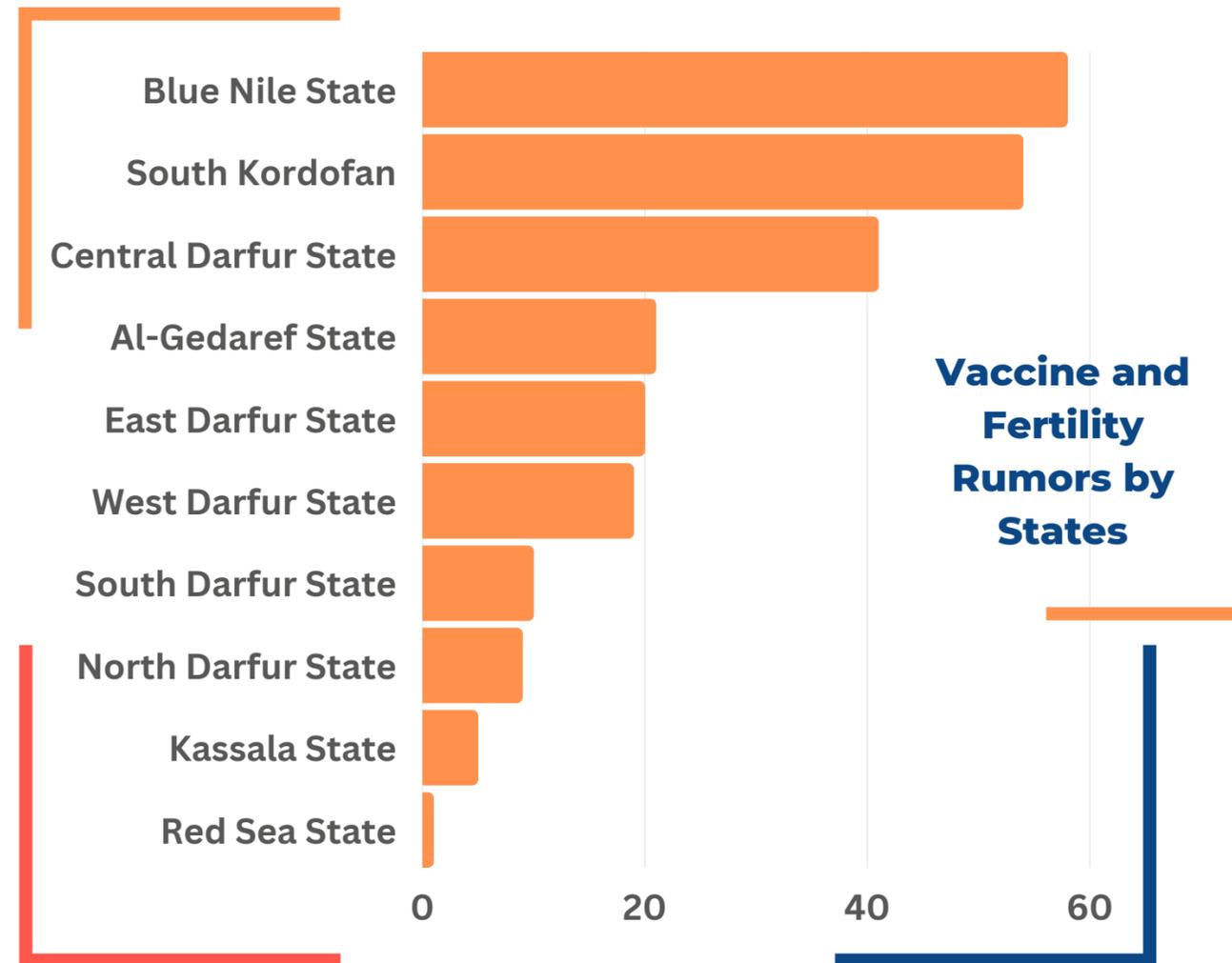
**Mohamed Salah Eldeen Hamid, Director General of Quality Development and Accreditation Directorate at the Ministry of Health** says: “Billions of people have been vaccinated from around the world, and of those, many are having children and expanding their families. Childbearing has not stopped even with COVID-19 vaccinations. These types of statements linking the vaccine with fertility are unfounded and irresponsible, they create fear and push people from getting vaccinated. The vaccines are meant to protect the people we love, and perverse life.”



According to **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**, “There is currently no evidence that vaccine ingredients or antibodies made following COVID-19 vaccination would cause any problems with becoming pregnant now or in the future”.



**WHO's Dr. Katherine O'Brien**, Director of the Department of Immunization, Vaccines, and Biologicals confirmed that “there is no vaccine that causes infertility”, which is a common rumor about all vaccines not just for COVID-19.



## Rumor #3

- ▶ **"Vaccine reduces masculinity"**  
Man – 26-35 – Mershing, South Darfur

### What's behind this rumor?

The rumor about COVID immunization impacting libido can be seen as an extension of a larger conspiracy about the pandemic. The environment was fertile for rumors that speak of a global conspiracy about vaccines acting as a tool to control population growth. Prior to the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines in Sudan, rumors started to circulate that the vaccine can impact sexual drive, which would in turn impact conception. Rumors had been circulating since the beginning of the pandemic in December 2019, that COVID-19 was a hoax and a way to contain the global population. For example, a man between ages 26 and 35 in Kassala state said: "The vaccines are made by non-believers so that we stop making babies because our population is high". This is likely linked to sterilization policies in some parts of the world, where medicine was used to control population growth or minority communities, such as the forced sterilization of Roma women in some European countries.



A listening group with deaf women in Port Sudan, Red Sea State

## Why is this important?

Internews is currently conducting an information ecosystem assessment about these issues. A number of men who took part in the focus group discussions in Kassala, South Kordofan, and West Darfur have shown reluctance to getting vaccinated because of fear of being judged by others. Some men personalize these types of rumors and fear that this could happen to them. Moreover, this rumor could create stigma, impacting men's social status within their community. Internews research demonstrates where stigma is deep it can potentially affect the chances of men who are vaccinated in finding a spouse and starting a family. These types of rumors can create fear and although unfounded they effectively plant seeds of doubt about the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine.

These types of perceptions linking libido to the vaccine are powerful. Men and women who experience challenges with their fertility can also face judgment by family members and others in their community. It is as if there is something wrong with these men and women if they have not conceived yet. In rural communities and in certain parts of Sudan affected by conflict, opportunities for accessing reliable and trustworthy information can be limited, allowing these types of rumors to spread widely. There are cases where misconceptions about the effect of vaccines on libido have resulted in some men avoiding vaccination and advising their own family members and community from seeking COVID-19 immunization. Although these reports are not facts or based on scientific research they are circulating, people have reacted to them, and they do carry some weight.



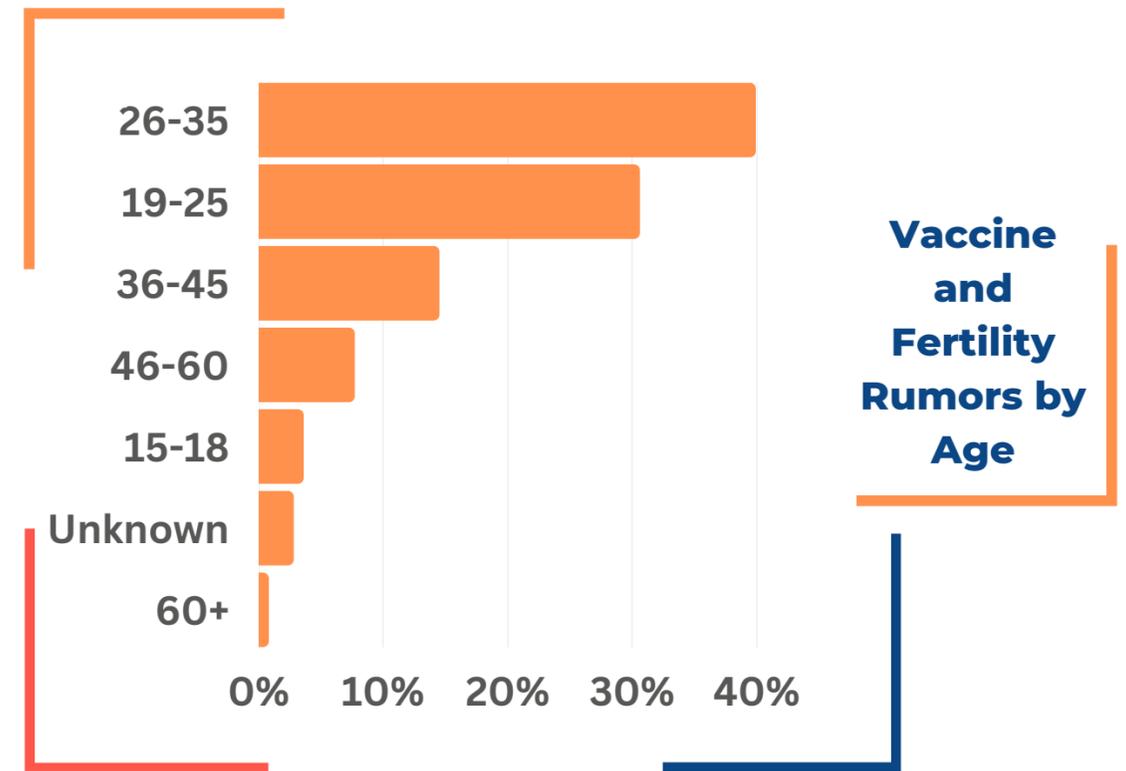
## Facts

**Dr. Mina Nabil, Specialist in OB/GYN and Infertility** confirms there is no apparent impact on male fertility from any of the available COVID-19 vaccines. However, he explains that infection with COVID-19 or mutated forms of the Coronavirus can affect male fertility, with some men experiencing a slight decrease in sperm quality. He notes that COVID-19 can infect the testicles, and the severity of the infection can impact the testicles to a greater degree.

**Dr. Nabil** adds that some men who were infected with COVID-19 experienced a decrease in sperm count and movement. Inflammatory cells were also found in the testicles of some men who were infected. In more severe cases, some men experienced the inability to have an erection or a loss of sexual desire.

**Dr. Tasneem Tajelsir, former COVAX National Consultant for Adverse Events Following Immunization**, concludes: "In Sudan, there are no reports of COVID-19 vaccines impacting sperm count in men, and there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that the vaccines decrease fertility in both men and women."

In 2021, **Dr. Yaman Al-Tal, Consultant in Urology, ED and Andrology in UAE and Jordan**, advised taking all preventive measures against COVID-19 including the vaccine to avoid such sexual health complications.



# Recommendations



- Rumors linking vaccination to fertility and reproductive health problems should be **debunked at all levels, by humanitarians, public health responders and local journalists**.
- Healthcare workers and humanitarians should **normalize discussions about fertility and reproductive health**, by addressing communities' information voids and information needs on these topics using communities' preferred communication channels and language.
- Doctors and community health workers should **work with trusted sources of information within communities in debunking misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccines**, but also provide more information about other factors that could affect fertility and libido (*like stress, diabetes, and poor nutrition*).
- Community health workers and outreach workers can **create gendered safe spaces so that both men and women can share their concerns** and ask questions, but also access reliable and trustworthy information.
- Public Health responders, humanitarians, and journalists should present more **diverse content**, and spokespeople to address fertility-related rumors or questions about the vaccine that people **trust** and relate to (*like haboba, healthcare workers, and traditional birth attendants*).

# About Rooted in Trust

The Sudan Rooted in Trust project at Internews aims to respond to the COVID-19 “infodemic”, including misinformation and rumors which affect access to basic services and assistance of vulnerable communities in Sudan. This periodic collection of rumors and misperceptions that circulate in Sudanese social media aims to provide humanitarian and public health actors suggestions for integrating community perspectives and concerns into their communication activities and strategy. These rumors have been gathered from social media and do not derive exclusively from popular groups with large numbers of followers, but aim to include voices of diverse, and vulnerable groups.

For more information on the project, please visit:

[Sudan Rooted in Trust](#)

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

Contact: Asia Kambal, Project Manager,  
akambal@INTERNEWS.ORG