



## HEALTH PROMOTION

# Addressing HPV Vaccine Hesitancy: A Crucial Step Toward Cervical Cancer Prevention in Pakistan

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## Keywords

HPV vaccine • Vaccine hesitancy • Cervical cancer prevention • Public health

Dear editor,

Cervical cancer remains a preventable tragic condition in Pakistan with hundreds of women being affected annually as a result of late presentation and persistent unawareness regarding prevention. Following the *Human Papilloma Virus* (HPV) Information Centre, cervical cancer is the second leading cancer among women between 15-44 years of age in Pakistan, where about 5,000 new cases are reported annually, and 3,000 deaths due to the frighteningly high death rate of 60-85% against the global average of 45% [1].

The HPV vaccine heralds an historic advancement in Pakistan's public health. Supported by the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI), the campaign aims to vaccinate 13 million girls ages 9-14 years in Punjab, Sindh, Islamabad, and AJK; the vaccination program starts in September 2025 [2]. Not only is this action in line with the World Health Organization's recommendation to immunize girls before they initiate sexual activity. The WHO 90-70-90 strategy aims to eliminate cervical cancer as a public health problem by 2030 through three key targets: vaccinating 90% of girls against HPV by age 15, screening 70% of women at least twice in their lifetime, and ensuring 90% of those diagnosed with cervical disease receive appropriate treatment [3], but this action also gives Pakistan a chance to minimize its burden of cervical cancer in the long run.

A general reluctance or resistance to vaccination fueled by disinformation and socio-cultural norms is diminishing the effectiveness of this lifesaving resource. Several parents wrongly assume the vaccine will lead to infertility or disturbed hormones, while others see the vaccine as a means of allowing sexual activity before marriage, which is sensitive in conservative Pakistan [4]. To address these barriers a multi-component strategy is required. First, trusted community leaders, including doctors, teachers, and religious scholars, need to be front-facing on awareness campaigns to address misinformation, and encourage the vaccine as a moral and collective public health responsibility. Next, the routine HPV vaccination with other vaccine components in the childhood immunization schedule will not only help to normalize the vaccine like other vaccines for

polio and measles, but also increase acceptance and familiarity of vaccination. Third, transparent messaging from the federal government and media about the vaccine's proven safety and efficacy will help to restore trust and confidence in the vaccine.

The prevention of cervical cancer is not only a medical issue, but a social obligation. Protecting young girls through HPV vaccination represents Pakistan's commitment to women's health, education, and empowerment. On the other hand, HPV is associated with genital warts, 90% of anal cancers as well as 60% of oropharyngeal cancers in men population [5]. However current vaccination campaign does not include the male population; including men in future efforts can help reduce transmission and related cancers. Clearly, Pakistan must take strong action against misinformation and ensure that no girl is left unprotected from a preventable disease.

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## Conflicts of interest statement

None.

## Authors' contributions

AA: concept, writing and editing; MN: writing and editing; PM: reviewing the final draft and editing; MHS: revision and writing.

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