

### Highlights

- With the advent of winter and the second wave of the pandemic, many research participants shared their observation that more people are wearing masks outside. However, key challenges remain in practicing preventive measures. For example, women in some provinces admitted that their families couldn't afford to buy soap or detergent to wash and clean properly owing to poverty. They felt there was inadequate financial support from the government and access to support was sometimes marred by corruption. Nonetheless, many families felt they would really need help and support to survive this winter.
- Loss of livelihood and severe unemployment leading to acute poverty and malnutrition in rural areas, absence of basic resources to survive in winter months, and lack of healthcare support in beyond Kabul and few major cities are still the issues most concerning the participants. Fear is growing that another lockdown will only intensify these situations and bring catastrophe in their lives.
- Generally, there is acceptance of any authorised Covid-19 vaccine (i.e. by the Ministry of Public Health or WHO) among most participants. However, concerns remain amongst some who may feel hesitant or reject the vaccine. For example, respondents reported seeing and hearing rumours and negative campaigns against any future vaccination against Covid-19 on social media and in their communities (by mullahs). Respondents felt that there was a need for a pre-emptive and proactive campaign on mass-media to inform people about vaccine to encourage uptake.

*“Texts with images are being shared on Facebook which claim that the United States has added substances to the Covid-19 vaccine that can be used to control the human mind.” (A female participant from Kunduz)*

### Key findings

- Respondents generally hold positive attitude towards the vaccine uptake

As reported last month, there continues to be a consensus among male and female respondents across all six provinces that they will accept a potential vaccine for Covid-19 introduced by the Ministry of Public Health or World Health Organization (WHO). They also believe that most of their community members will accept the vaccine because Covid-19 has no other treatment except the vaccine; however, some participants suggested pre-vaccination public awareness about importance of the vaccine is necessary to convince some parts of the community. They said a campaign would help those who may reject the vaccine to make informed decision.

*“People in our community pray that the vaccine be produced. They believe it will cure the disease and therefore, will accept to be vaccinated.” (A female participant from Daikundi)*

Meanwhile, most of men and women respondents highlighted that a portion of society may reject the vaccine specifically those who have been exposed to anti-vaccination campaigns in the social media and families specially women in the rural areas who follows anti-vaccine influencers. Some women reported that local mullahs in their areas- oppose Covid-19 vaccine for one or a combination of several reasons i.e. the belief that Covid-19 does not exist: the risk of side effects of the vaccine and religious beliefs. It also

pointed out by some male participants from Helmand, Balkh and Nangarhar that some people may reject taking the vaccine due to lack of awareness, rumours around risk of side effects and some due to religious beliefs. As highlighted in November report, some individuals (male) from rural areas of Helmand, Nangarhar and Kunduz believe that ‘life and death is in the hands of God’ and they do not need a vaccine to save their lives.

## • Second wave of Covid-19 & winter

All While everyone admits having noticed effects of second wave of Covid-19 on their lives, the most common concerns of men and women were unemployment, poverty and insecurity. Some participants are worried about another potential lockdown which, according to them, would cause serious economic problems. This fear was more of a concern amongst participants from urban areas because they would be more affected since they rely on jobs.

Having experienced the first wave of the pandemic, participant are also concerned about the fast transmission of the virus, due to lack of compliance in observing preventive measures by the public, and peoples’ lack of trust on the competency of the health sector in dealing with the expected outbreak.

Male and female respondents who live in provinces which experience particularly cold winter seasons, including Daikundi, Faryab and Balkh, are concerned about the fast transmission of Coronavirus as they believe that the

*“People in Daikundi are worried about the second wave of Covid-19. The Covid-19 centre is at the centre of Daikundi, but people and patients from districts have difficulties accessing the centre as the road condition is bad. Also, healthcare facilities in Daikundi are very limited.” (Man, frontline health worker, Daikundi)*

virus is more resistant in cold weather. In remote provinces like Daikundi, with winter already here, the geographical location of the province and poor transportation infrastructure has made people more concerned about the impact of a second wave. Roads connecting districts to the provincial centre of Nili and Kabul are expected to occasionally be closed during the winter due to heavy snowfall which would limit their access to healthcare centres. Therefore, these participants say they are afraid of a potential humanitarian crisis with the Covid-19 outbreak during the winter.

## • Impact of Covid-19

The most obvious and serious impact of Covid-19 has been economic. While all groups of the society have been negatively affected by the pandemic, women and girls, and those with small businesses have been severely affected. The pandemic has disrupted normal transportation system and has limited farmers’ access to regional markets as the borders have been closed during the pandemic. This has caused an over-abundance of fresh fruits like apples and pomegranates that could not be absorbed in local markets.

- **Women and young girls continue to be impacted by Covid-19**

*“I had no customer last month and I had to pay the rent of my saloon out of my pocket.” (A female beauty parlour, Jalalabad)*

As seen in previous reporting, respondents continued to share examples of how the pandemic was adversely affecting women and girls. The impact varies around loss of jobs, stress and mental health, domestic violence, and child marriage. Some businesses, such as hairdressing/beauty parlour, restaurants, wedding accessory sellers, tailoring, embroidery and women working as house cleaners have

already been affected by early impact of second wave.

- **Covid-19 has driven poverty, child marriage, and malnutrition in mothers and children**

*“I have witnessed many young-aged girls’ forced marriages; The reasons for these are not only Covid-19 problems but poverty and general economic problems. We held jirgas and have decided that early aged marriages are okay, but when the girl reaches the legal age the groom can take her home.” (A CDC member from Helmand)*

Some respondents say due to economic hardships and severe poverty driven by the pandemic, some families had to exchange their young girls for money either in form of marriage or adoption. Many of such cases have happened in rural regions and reported by CDC (Community Development Councils)] members and community elders from Helmand, Kunduz and Balkh provinces.

Women and men across all provinces believe that healthcare facilities are not available equally to women. The most prominent issue is limited number of female healthcare staff. This was reported as an issue especially in

*“Facilities for women are less compared to men because we have very limited female healthcare staff. Our society is traditional and male-dominated where women are not allowed outside home for medication.” (Female, CDC member, Balkh)*

conservative rural societies of Daikundi, Balkh, Helmand, Kunduz and Nangarhar, where women are not allowed to visit hospitals for medical care. Such cases are mostly pointed out by female respondents and are reported in rural areas.

In Daikundi, Faryab and Balkh, severe poverty and hunger have resulted in malnutrition in children. Health workers reported an increase in cases of malnutrition of children under five years of age in hospitals’ records since mothers do not have proper nutrition to support breastfeeding. The reason mentioned by the participants

is poverty and loss of family income that has affected normal diet of families resulting in inappropriate nutrition of mothers.



Focus Group Discussion with women in Kunduz, BBC Media Action

## • Preventive measures

M There has been a minor progress towards observing preventative measures by the people in December. Study

*“I witnessed them [doctors] ignoring preventive measures, but they impose these on us.” (A female student from Kunduz)*

participants say this month they have noticed that in urban areas of Balkh, Kunduz and Faryab, more people are wearing face masks compared the previous month. However, ignoring preventive measures is still a major issue. Participants claim that

doctors and health workers do not follow these measures themselves and people pay less attention to surface cleaning. Health workers and authorities not acting in compliance with preventative measures have made some assume that Covid-19 has ended and there is no need to follow these measures.

Mothers from Balkh, Daikundi and Kunduz have acknowledged that due to poverty, they had to wash dishes and clothes and took bath without detergent or disinfectant material.

## • Rumours and misinformation around Covid-19

The most commonly heard rumours reported this month are:

- Burning *Espan* (wild rue) is practiced in Balkh and Kunduz to kill the virus.

- Men and women from Kunduz, Daikundi and Balkh have heard rumours that Covid-19 health centres remove organs of dead bodies without permission of their families. That is why these centres do not allow opening coffin of individuals who die due to Covid-19.
- Schools and universities are not closed due to Covid-19 risk but because of insecurity and inability of the government in tackling it (said by some participants from Kunduz, Balkh and Faryab).
- Text with images are being shared on social media stating that the vaccines contains substances added by the US that can used to control human minds and some other says the vaccine cause other sickness (said by women from Kunduz and Faryab).

### • Communities' immediate need

With the winter approaching, majority of participants from all six provinces - including IDPs from Balkh, Faryab, Helmand and Kunduz - point out the need for financial support and provision of food items as well as hygiene packages, winter clothing and fuel for heating. However, majority of these participants do not trust government's campaign in fighting the pandemic and providing them these necessities to them stating corruption and nepotism as major issues. They believe that the government has failed to support the most vulnerable families. Meanwhile, participants from urban areas believe that wakil-e guzars (community representatives) are also involved in corruption and it has caused injustice in the distribution of aid.



*Focus Group Discussion with IDPs in Faryab*

### • Research Methodology

A total of 32 in-depth individual interviews with both men and women including CDC members, active journalists and frontline health workers, and 23 FGDs with IDPs, radio listeners as well as students and parents were conducted in six provinces including Helmand, Balkh, Faryab, Daikundi, Kunduz and Nangarhar.

To understand better how communities are experiencing Covid-19, we asked people what are their main current concerns; their knowledge on Covid-19; what information they currently have, what information they need; their perception about Covid-19 vaccine and what are their sources of information. Radio listeners and IDPs were asked to share their own experiences and practices; while CDC members, Frontline health workers and journalists were asked to share their own experiences as well as to reflect on their communities' experiences. In addition to these interviews, data has been triangulated with other research findings from other ongoing BBC Media Action in Afghanistan projects looking at Covid-19.

Prior to conducting the research, we consulted with some members of Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) Working Group to incorporate their information needs in our research tools.

## About Community Voice

This Monthly Research Paper is produced based on feedback collected from communities around Afghanistan affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It aims to provide a summary of community perceptions, worries and concerns, to assist the health and humanitarian community to better plan and implement activities with communities' needs and preferences in mind. It is a product of BBC Media Action with funding from Global Affairs Canada and World Health Organization. Its content is the responsibility of BBC Media Action, and any views expressed herein should not be taken to represent those of the BBC itself, or any donors supporting the work of the charity.

*We welcome further collaboration from other organisations who would like to share feedback they are receiving in areas where they work; or contribute to the analysis and production of the bulletin. If you would like to get involved, please contact Ahmad Rashed Hayati at [rashed.hayati@af.bbcmmediaaction.org](mailto:rashed.hayati@af.bbcmmediaaction.org).*