

### **COVID-19 Impact on Health Services Utilization: Focus on RMNCH\***

Globally, COVID-19 has adversely impacted health systems at countless levels, contributing to increase in disease burdens and higher mortality. The pandemic has infected more than 105 million people with at least 2.3 million deaths worldwide <sup>[1]</sup>. In Pakistan, so far, there are 550,540 confirmed cases and 11,833 deaths have been reported due to COVID-19 since February 2020 <sup>[2]</sup>. This sudden increase in mortality has not only stressed the health system, but also severely impacted the service utilization for maternal and child health in Pakistan. As many outpatient Departments (OPD) were closed, it is expected that the routine maternal and child health services got adversely affected by COVID-19. Therefore, the health system needs immediate strategic interventions and measures to mitigate COVID-19 impacts.

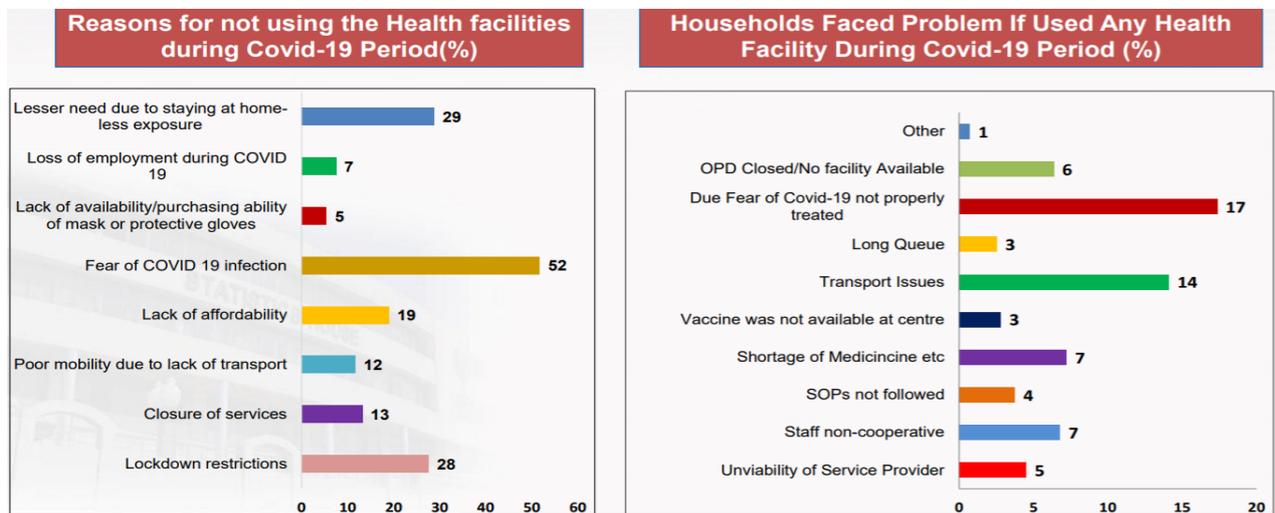
Pakistan maternal mortality ratio was 186/100000 (2019) against SDG target of 70/100000. The infant and under 5 years children mortality rate was (57/1000; SDG: 12/1000) and (67/1000; SDG: 25/1000) births respectively <sup>[3]</sup>. Pakistan had high maternal and neonatal mortality and morbidity even before COVID-19. With this pandemic, the threat has become more critical. Although our capacity to deal with COVID-19 infections has improved, however, there is a dearth of trained healthcare workers to manage pregnant women and counsel lactating mothers suffering with COVID-19. Number of pediatricians to manage childcare remains limited, similarly the infrastructure and workforce to provide services of family planning, antenatal care and delivery care is quite deficient. Nationwide children immunization in 2019 was progressing with wide coverage in many districts <sup>[4]</sup>. However, COVID-19 halted immunization campaigns for two months that resulted in reduced immunization coverage nationwide.

During COVID-19 there has been disruption of essential services for maternal, new born and child care. According to Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS-2017-18), 69% of the births were delivered by a skilled provider, and 66% were delivered in a health facility. Postnatal care services utilization was low, being only 62%. For the family planning / contraceptive services, overall, 34% of the married women used a method of family planning, (25% using a modern method and 9% using a traditional method) <sup>[5]</sup>. As the new data becomes available, it will become evident how these utilization rates got negatively impacted by COVID-19.

A recent national survey conducted by Pakistan Bureau of Statistics for 6000 households reveal major problems faced when using health facilities. According to the data, 52% of the households were reluctant to go to a health facility because of the fear of catching COVID-19 infection. Other factors that were reported included lack of purchasing power for personal protective equipment (such as masks and gloves); lack of mobility/ transportation services, lockdown and closure of

services. Disruption in these services might be responsible for hundreds of maternal and newborn mortalities nationwide during this pandemic. PBS national survey on socio-economic impacts highlighted the following main for health services utilization [6].

Figure-1



Keeping in mind, the effect of COVID-19 on health services utilization, especially for RMNCH, there is an immediate need for policy advice on the measures to address underutilization of health services and build system capacity to ensure timely availability of services. There is an urgent need to develop a sustainable policy framework to strengthen RMNCH. Experts in maternal and childcare along with other stakeholders can contribute in preparing strategies and interventions to plug in gaps to reduce mortality and morbidity. A strategic consultative meeting of the subject experts, stakeholders and decision- makers to deliberate on strategic issues is the need of time. This requires deliberation of stakeholders on the following strategic questions:

### Questions:

1. What has been the impact of COVID-19 on RMNCH services in Pakistan?
2. What should be the future policy options to address underutilization of health services during health emergencies such as COVID-19?

### References:

1. WHO COVID-19 data repository.COVID19.who.int
2. The National COVID-19 data repository [www.COVID.gov.pk](http://www.COVID.gov.pk)
3. UNFPA Pakistan 2020 report of PMMI
4. UNICEF data warehouse for Pakistan; immunization
5. Government of Pakistan: NIPS, Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, (2017-18)
6. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Socio-economic Impact Survey 2020.

\* RMNCH = Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health