

Government Policies in Combating COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan: A Gender-based Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: One of the most significant determinants of risk perceptions and coping mechanisms is gender, which reflects the public's propensity to embrace health initiatives and exercise caution. This study aims to understand the gender differences in perspective regarding government policies in combating COVID-19 pandemic.

Subjects and methods: This analytical cross-sectional study was conducted as an online google survey from April to September 2021 in Lahore using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. SPSS version 23 was used for the analysis of the data, which was gathered using a self-structured questionnaire from 200 participants. Chi-square test was applied to deal with qualitative variables and a p-value ≤ 0.05 was considered significant.

Results: Out of 200 respondents, 92(46%) were males and 108(54%) were females. Mean age of the participants was 25.8 ± 6.6 years. Significant differences were found in perceptions between males & females in containing Corona virus by putting restrictions on wedding halls and social gatherings (p-value=0.05) as well as government's decision of closing the educational institutions and online learning classes (p-value=0.035). Significant differences were also seen in perceptions of both genders regarding strict punishment for those who break SOP's in form of fines (p-value=0.001), vaccination mandatory for every individual (p-value=0.008) and PCR diagnostic test should be done free of cost (p-value=0.003).

Conclusion: Women are more inclined to agree with and follow restraining measures and laws, and to view the pandemic as a very serious health issue. This data reveals a realm of gender disparities as well as behavioral changes in reaction to a new risk, which has significant implications for gender-based public health policy and COVID-19 communication.

Keywords:

Perceptions, policies, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has had an impact on nearly every facet of human existence, ranging from major health difficulties to social, psychological, economic, and financial spheres of activity.¹ It has been found in prior research that women are more likely to view COVID-19 as a very significant health concern.² This is because women tend to have more conservative views towards health issues. These facts almost certainly will have significant role for the formulation of public policy.³ During the Covid-19 pandemic sickness, Pakistani government agencies were unable to comprehend the behavior of the country's citizens.⁴ Even before the first case was announced, the government of Pakistan took a number of preventive measures to reduce the likelihood that the disease would spread.⁵ The Ministry of Health formulated a comprehensive national action plan aimed at attaining optimal preparedness and proficient

response to the COVID-2019 pandemic. The objective was achieved through the implementation of comprehensive measures aimed at preventing the occurrence of a COVID-2019 outbreak. The creation of this approach was significantly influenced by the World Health Organization (WHO). Furthermore, this approach encompassed the discernment and mobilization of accessible fiscal and alternative assets to guarantee an optimal state of readiness and responsiveness.⁶ Additional efforts include the deployment of health precautions for travelers, the improvement of the ready ability to swiftly detect, diagnose, and treat cases, including the identification of contacts with tracing and follow up, and the reduction of community transmission of the virus in Pakistan. With the assistance of the armed forces of Pakistan, quarantine centers were constructed in Karachi and Lahore.⁷ In March 2020, provincial governments attempted to improve the situation by enforcing a statewide lockdown across the country; however, this was met with opposition from both the general people and radicals.⁸

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A significant proportion of individuals hold the belief that their government and fellow citizens are not adequately addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic.⁹ There exists a positive correlation between heightened levels of anxiety and despair both the government and the general populace.¹⁰ During pandemics, these behaviors include frequent hand washing, physical distancing, avoiding public places, and wearing face masks.¹¹⁻¹²

The purpose of this study was to examine the present condition of the COVID-19 pandemic and the policies implemented by the government to manage it. Additionally, it aimed to explore how these strategies were regarded by individuals of different genders, while also considering the constraints and challenges associated with emergency preparedness.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

An analytical cross-sectional study was conducted through an online google survey in Lahore from April to September 2021 which was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB approval No. M-19/058/-CM) of Akhtar Saeed Medical and Dental College. A sample size of 217 was determined with the help of WHO sample size calculator by keeping 95% confidence level with 5% margin of error. Data was gathered using a convenience sampling technique and the responses were collected through emails. The response rate was more than 92 percent. The questionnaire was self-designed and consisted of different variables identified from literature search. Perceptions of both genders were assessed by asking about the different strategies implemented by the government of Pakistan and how did the participants respond to those initiatives to combat COVID-19 pandemic. Those people who were able to fill out online google forms and older than eighteen, were included in the study. SPSS version 23 was used to enter, code, and analyze the gathered data. Pie charts and frequency tables were used to present the data. Chi-square test was used to find association between qualitative variables and p-value less than 0.05 was considered significant. Quantitative variables were presented with mean and standard deviation. The participants gave their informed consent, and the confidentiality of data was maintained during and after the study.

RESULTS

Table 1 revealed that out of 200 respondents, 108 (54%) were females and 92 (46%) were males. Out of

total, 140 (70%) were graduates and 81 (40.5%) participants had income more than Rs. 100,000 per month. Mean age of the participants was 25.8 ± 6.6 years.

As shown in Figure 1, 133 (66.5%) respondents considered that government policies were effective in combating pandemic. Out of total respondents, 83 (41.5%) believed that government hospitals could handle the COVID-19 load, while 117 (58.5%) disagreed.

Table 2 showed that significant differences were found in perceptions between both males & females in containing Corona virus by putting restrictions on

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of respondents.

Characteristics	Frequency (n=200)	Percentage
Male	92	46
Female	108	54
Age		
18-30 years	183	91.5
31-40 years	6	3
41-50 years	7	3.5
Above 50 years	4	2
Educational status		
Matric	1	0.5
Intermediate	38	19
Graduate	140	70
Masters & above	21	10.5
Location		
Lahore	97	48.5
Outside Lahore	103	51.5
Total family income in rupees per month		
<25,000	28	14
25,001-50,000	33	16.5
50,001-75,000	22	11
75,001-100,000	36	18
Above 100,000	81	40.5
Occupation		
Businessman	6	3
Doctor	102	51
Office worker	9	4.5
Teacher	10	5
Any other	73	36.5

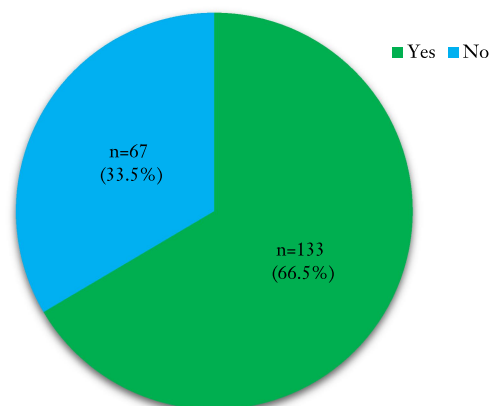


Figure 1: Respondent's view about effectiveness of government policies in combating COVID-19

Table 2: Bivariate analysis of perceptions of males and females regarding government policies in combating COVID-19 pandemic

Variable	Gender		Total	p-value
	Female n (%)	Male n (%)		
1. People perceived coronavirus as				
• Biological weapon	5 (35.7)	9 (64.3)	14	0.566
• Global pandemic	82 (55.4)	66 (44.6)	148	
• Highly infectious disease	15 (55.6)	12 (44.4)	27	
• International conspiracy	6 (54.5)	5 (45.5)	11	
2. Lockdown was an effective policy against COVID-19	92 (55)	75 (45)	167	0.487
3. Satisfied by the government policies to contain Corona virus	74 (51.7)	69 (48.3)	143	0.312
4. Wearing mask can prevent COVID-19	101 (55.5)	81 (44.5)	182	0.178
5. Supported government decision to wear mask and keep social distancing mandatory	106 (54.4)	89 (45.6)	195	0.525
6. Supported restrictions on public transport	89 (56)	70 (44)	159	0.270
7. Restrictions on wedding halls and social gatherings would help to reduce spread of disease	103 (56)	82 (44)	185	0.056*
8. SOP's for markets to halt the spread of disease	79 (53)	71 (47)	150	0.512
9. Strict punishment should be given to those who broke SOPs	99 (59)	69 (41)	168	0.001*
10. Online classes instead of traditional classes	64 (51.2)	61 (48.8)	125	0.035*
11. Health education messages were effectively provided through TV and other media	94 (54)	80 (46)	174	0.987
12. Vaccination should be mandatory for every individual	102 (57.3)	76 (42.7)	178	0.008*
13. The government should do testing free of cost	106 (54.6)	88 (45.4)	194	0.003*
14. The government should increase laboratory diagnostic capacity	87 (57.2)	65 (42.8)	152	0.102
15. Home isolation was the right step when detected positive for COVID-19	103 (53.6)	89 (46.4)	192	0.622
16. Government hospitals had capacity to handle the patients of COVID-19	44 (53)	39 (47)	83	0.813
17. Satisfied with air travel SOPs to halt the spread of corona virus	88 (54.3)	74 (45.7)	162	0.851

*p-value found to be statistically significant

wedding halls and social gatherings (p-value=0.05) as well as government's decision of closing the educational institutions and online learning classes (p-value=0.035). Significant differences were also seen in perceptions of both genders regarding strict punishment should be given to those who break SOP's in the form of fines (p-value=0.001), vaccination should be mandatory for every individual (p-value=0.008) and PCR diagnostic test should be done free of cost (p-value=0.003). No significant difference in perceptions between males and females were seen in participants who thought Corona virus to be a biological weapon, infectious disease or global pandemic. No significant results in both genders were seen in their perceptions regarding lockdown was an effective policy to contain Corona virus, wearing mask had helped them to escape from disease and those who supported government decision to impose restrictions on public transport and keep social distancing mandatory.

DISCUSSION

The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a significant public health emergency that has profound ramifications for communities, healthcare systems, and economies on a global scale.¹³⁻¹⁴ Out of the total sample size, 14 individuals (7%) perceived the phenomenon as a global epidemic, while 148 individuals (74%) perceived it as a biological weapon. Additionally, 27 individuals (13.5%) regarded it as a highly infectious

sickness, and 11 individuals (5.5%) perceived it as an international conspiracy. During the research conducted in Bangladesh, a total of 240 respondents were surveyed. Among these respondents, 290 individuals, accounting for 85% of the sample, expressed their perception of COVID-19 as a global pandemic.¹⁵

In the present investigation, a total of 143 individuals, including 71.5% of the sample, expressed satisfaction towards the governmental measures implemented to address the COVID-19 pandemic. In another study, a total of 200 individuals were polled. Among these respondents, 110 individuals, accounting for 55% of the sample, expressed dissatisfaction with the government's level of responsiveness.¹⁶ 133 individuals, representing 66.5% of the respondents, considered government steps adequate for reducing the spread of COVID-19. Conversely, 67 individuals, accounting for 33.5% of the participants, reported perceiving these policies as ineffectual in containing the virus. During a separate study conducted in Europe, it was found that 68% of individuals expressed approval for the strategies implemented by their respective countries in reaction to the pandemic.¹⁷

Among the 200 participants surveyed, a majority of 167 individuals (83.5%) expressed the belief that implementing a lockdown was an effective measure in combating the spread of COVID-19. Further analysis revealed that among this group, 92 respondents

identified as female, while the remaining 75 identified as male. During a separate research conducted in France, a total of 350 participants were surveyed. Among these respondents, 285 individuals (81%) reported adhering to social separation measures during the lockdown and had a favorable attitude towards its implementation.¹⁸ Among the 167 participants who expressed support for implementing a lockdown, a majority of 130 individuals (77.9%) favored the implementation of a smart lockdown over a complete lockdown, while a minority of 37 individuals (22.1%) preferred a complete lockdown. During a separate study conducted in Italy, a total of 100,000 participants were surveyed. Among these respondents, it was found that 30,000 individuals, accounting for 30% of the sample, expressed a preference for implementing a complete lockdown.¹⁹

In this study, 195 individuals (97.5%) expressed agreement with the governmental directive to wear masks and maintain strict social separation. In Canada, a total of 1741 individuals participated in the survey, with 1390 respondents (80%) indicating that they engaged in self-isolation, consistently used masks, and maintained physical distancing measures.²⁰ Among the 200 participants who responded, it was found that 31 individuals (15.5%) saw the government's policy on availability masks as great, 88 individuals (44%) perceived it as good, 70 individuals (35%) considered it to be ordinary, and 11 individuals (5.5%) regarded it as terrible. In a separate study conducted in New Zealand, a total of 1015 participants were surveyed, of which 884 individuals (86.7%) had a positive perception on the government's stance on mask availability.²¹

Among the 200 participants who were surveyed, a significant majority of 185 individuals, accounting for 92.5% of the total respondents, expressed their agreement with the implementation of governmental measures aimed at imposing limitations on wedding halls and social gatherings as a preventive measure against the spread of COVID-19. In the United States, it was observed that a significant drop in foot traffic, ranging from 74% to 83%, may be attributed to the implementation of statutory restrictions on social gatherings.²² In a separate study conducted in Jordan, it was observed that the proportion of confirmed COVID-19 cases originating from a wedding event accounted for 24% of the total reported cases in the country.²³

In this study, 160 respondents, accounting for 80% of the total sample, expressed their belief in the efficacy of educational institute closures as a measure to

effectively mitigate the spread of the virus. In a study done in Jordan, a total of 410 respondents were surveyed, of which 315 individuals (77%) expressed their belief in the efficacy of government directives pertaining to educational institutions.²⁴

In this study, 125 respondents (62.5%) expressed agreement with the government's resolution to close educational institutions and transition to online classes. In a study conducted in Indonesia, it was found that among a total of 66 participants, a significant majority of 62 students (93.9%) actively engaged in online lessons, while a small minority of just 4 students (6.1%) encountered difficulties in accessing the online sessions.²⁵

Among the 200 respondents surveyed, a majority of 150 individuals (75%) expressed their belief in the effectiveness of the standard operating procedures (SOPs) for markets were up to the mark. During a study conducted in Malaysia, a total of 283,040 participants were surveyed on their opinions on the continuation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in public places during lockdown. The findings revealed that 47% of the participants expressed support for the limited continuation of SOPs, while 24% advocated for stricter measures.²⁶

Among the 200 participants surveyed, a majority of 162 individuals (81%) expressed agreement with the efficacy of government-imposed limits on dine-in restaurants as a means of combatting the disease. Majority, 66.6% of the people surveyed in the United States expressed agreement with the notion that dining inside restaurants should be prohibited.²⁷

Among the 200 participants surveyed, a significant majority of 195 individuals (97.5%) expressed agreement with the efficacy of vaccination programmes. In the Australian context, it was shown that among a sample size of 1,420 individuals, a significant majority of 1,143 respondents (80%) expressed agreement with the notion that receiving a COVID-19 vaccination would effectively safeguard them against COVID infection. Conversely, a smaller subset of 277 participants (20%) indicated a lack of awareness regarding this preventive measure.²⁸⁻²⁹

In the conducted survey, a total of 126 individuals (63%) expressed agreement with the notion that the government has the capacity to deal with pandemic. In the context of Bangladesh, it was found that among a total of 1,066 respondents, a majority of 800 individuals (75.4%) expressed the notion that their government has augmented healthcare capacity.³⁰

The study is subject to certain limitations. The observational aspect of this design restricts our capacity to infer causal links. Finally, it is important to note that studies relying on self-reported data may be susceptible to information bias as a result of the social desirability effect.

CONCLUSION

The majority of responders expressed satisfaction with government initiatives to battle the disease and thought that COVID-19 was a global pandemic. The findings show that there were notable differences in coping strategies between Pakistani men and women, as well as in how fear and trust were viewed. It was discovered that when it came to COVID-19, women saw hazards more, followed government regulations more closely, and handled it better than men. The majority of them favoured social distance, lockdowns, and limitations on public transportation. Numerous individuals appeared content with the nationwide immunisation campaign and the upgraded diagnostic infrastructure in the nation.

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