**IDs and vaccines**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-04-28

PAKISTAN is once again on the brink. The past several days have seen rising death tolls increasing to the point that they are daily records in themselves. The unforgiving coronavirus that has upended the world and killed more than half a million people in the world`s richest country and millions all over the globe is threatening to choke Pakistan once again.

Since Pakistanis have become lax in their efforts at social distancing in the holy month, the military is being deployed to ensure that they observe the government-mandated SOPs. The threat of force, the government seems to have calculated, is the best way to get people to do what must be done: a Ramazan spent in isolation, Eid shopping foregone are the orders of the day.

However, one needs only to look across the border to see the consequences of not taking such measures.

The terrible grip of a double mutant strain of the coronavirushasincreased casesmanifold. Terrifying pictures are emerging from India that show cremations going on day and night as relatives complete the last rites of their loved ones who succumbed to the virus. According to reports from the New York Times, the pace of cremations is so ceaseless that the iron grills on which the bodies are placed for the purposes of cremation have started to melt.

The terrible oxygen shortage in hospitals, particularly in Delhi and Mumbai, two of the hardest-hit cities, has meant that oxygen tankers going to hospitals that are bursting at the seams have to have police escort. People are so desperate for their loved ones to get the oxygen that they are willing to go to any lengths to find the cylinders needed. It appears that the huge number of cases will require oxygen levels that are way beyond even increased production levels. According to reports, the black market for cylinders is thriving, with prices jacked up to levels beyond the reach of the average Indian.

The only solution to the coronavirus crisis is the administration of vaccines. In Pakistan, the government recently took a commendable step by deciding that it would allow walk-in vaccinations for the age group 50 and above. (Those who are 60 and above were first given this facility.) This essentially meansthat af ter registering themselves, individuals in this age group would not have wait for a code or date and could go directly to the vaccination centre.

The government is now going to start vaccinating those who are 40 and above. Many Pakistanis are taking advantage of this and getting the two shots of the Sinopharm vaccine imported from China.

There is, however, one serious problem with Pakistan`s vaccine protocol. The Computerised National Identity Card (CNIC) requirement means that individuals from low-income backgrounds,women (particularly older women) and others who have not obtained a card, cannot get the vaccine.

These include, for instance, many domestic workers in the informal sector who have migrated from rural areas to the city to find work. Many do not have proper documentation or birth records and it is difficult for them to fulfil Nadra requirements to get one.

In one particular case, a young woman who works as domestic help in Lahore went to get her CNIC from Nadra, taking her mother`s CNIC with her.

However, at the Nadra office, the mother`s marital status showed up as single because neither her marriage nor subsequent divorce had been registered by Nadra. Attempts were made to contact the father who refused to go to the union council to register the divorce so that the details could be filled in.

Because of this, the young woman has so far been unable to obtain a CNIC. When the government opens up vaccination for her age group, she will beunable to register for it.

The CNIC requirement for the vaccine needs to be dropped, particularly in the case of women who are often left at the mercy of fathers and husbands to record marriages and divorces with the union council. It is difficult to get these documents in normal times, and near impossible to do all of this during a global pandemic. Women cannot be expected to go chasing after ex-husbands or union councils to get the correct documents which reflect their correct marital status.

The women of the world have had to bear the brunt of this pandemic`s losses. From having to put up with the constant demands and physical and verbal abuse of men who stay at home, to falling behind in their careers because they have to stay home to tend to their children, to dying of the virus because they are never taken to a hospital to receive adequate medical care, it has been a nightmare right from the very beginning.

The government of Pakistan is in a position to help women who are willing to be vaccinated against the virus. Lifting the CNIC requirement will allow more women to access the vaccine more easily. Not only will this control transmission rates and case numbers,it will also ensure that women are not lef t out of the vaccine effort because of the misdeeds of men.

The coronavirus does not discriminate or inquire whether or not a person has a CNIC before infecting them and every infected person spreads the disease to others around them. To stop the spread, it must be reiterated that it is essential for the government of Pakistan to lift CNIC requirements for those women who do not have documents. In the long term, efforts must be made to make it much easier to register marriages, divorces, etc with Nadra.

Poor Pakistani women must not be excluded from Pakistan`s ef forts to vaccinate the population; to do so would be to intentionally condemn them to illness or death at the hands of a virus that has brought the world to its knees.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

rafia.zakaria@gmail.com