



Policy Brief

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS APPROACHES TO INCREASE COVID-19 VACCINATION ACCEPTANCE BY OLDER PEOPLE IN CENTRAL JAVA



AUSTRALIA INDONESIA
HEALTH SECURITY
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UNIVERSITAS
GADJAH MADA

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Executive Summary

Research was conducted in early 2022 on the perspectives, acceptance and accessibility of COVID-19 vaccination, 3Ts (Testing, Tracing, and Treatment), and prevention of the coronavirus disease in the Indonesian province of Central Java. A collaboration between the Australia Indonesia Health Security Partnership (AIHSP) and Gadjah Mada University (UGM), this research delivered a number of findings on the acceptance of COVID-19 vaccination among the province's older residents.

Older people in Central Java were found to have reluctance with COVID-19 vaccination because of a lack of information. This study further found that cultural and religious factors can have a significant influence on decision-making around COVID-19 immunisation. These considerations can be utilised by central and local governments to develop strategies for disseminating information that is appropriate for older people. Use of media familiar to people in older age groups will also make distribution of information more efficient and promote acceptance of COVID-19 vaccination.

Introduction

This policy brief was prepared using findings from a research study into perspectives, acceptance and accessibility of COVID-19 vaccination, 3T actions, and coronavirus disease prevention, carried out in January 2022 by the Australia Indonesia Health Security Partnership (AIHSP) and the Center for Health Policy and Management (PKMK) Faculty of Medicine, Public Health and Nursing (FK-KMK) Gadjah Mada University (UGM).

The study indicated hesitancy toward receiving COVID-19 vaccination among older people in Central Java, a scenario that has hampered the Government of Indonesia in reaching its targets for vaccination coverage to establish herd immunity. Despite older people having no obstacles in getting COVID-19 vaccination in the province, the study found a wide imbalance between vaccine availability and acceptance. In fact, most respondents in Magelang Regency and Pekalongan City were not aware of the importance of vaccination.

COVID-19 Vaccination Coverage among Older People in Central Java Province

Target	Population 3,681,475
Coverage of Dose 1	81.49%
Coverage of Dose 2	63.38%
Coverage of Dose 3	27.17%

Source: https://vaksin.kemkes.go.id/#/detail_data, 21 July 2022

The study indicated that a lack of community-based and/or cultural information has made the public reluctant to receive COVID-19 vaccines, especially the second and third doses. Therefore, it is important that the community in general, and older people in particular, receive comprehensive and appropriately tailored information that encourages them to protect themselves and their families.

The Government of Indonesia is working on a scheme to expedite vaccination coverage, including by making COVID-19 vaccination mandatory. This scheme involves systems of incentives and disincentives.¹ For instance, in order to travel

¹ Christiano, D. (2022). Risk Communication Plays an Important Role in Increasing COVID-19 Vaccination. <https://katadata.co.id/dicky/infografik/626a8d51606de/komunikasi-risiko-berperan-penting-tingkatkan-vaksinasi-covid-19>





and access public facilities, residents will need to have received 2 and 3 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. The policy means that anyone refusing to be vaccinated will lose their right to travel and go to public places. This measure is provided for in Presidential Regulation No. 99 of 2020 on the Procurement of Vaccines and Vaccinations in the Context of Combating the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic.

In Central Java, aside from disincentives, it was found that vaccination programs (especially for the first and second doses) also involved incentive systems such as door prizes, supported by sponsors or private parties, to help motivate citizens on COVID-19 immunisation.

Results and Conclusions

1. People of older age in Central Java can be influenced by religious leaders about the effectiveness of COVID-19 Vaccination

Despite easy access to vaccines, improving perceptions of vaccination among older people in Central Java remains challenging. One of the reasons is that religious leaders do not believe that COVID-19 exists and they, therefore, dismiss the need for vaccination. Because older women in particular obey their religious leaders, they will take on the attitudes of leaders who do not believe in vaccination.

Several studies have attempted to draw an overview of how religious leaders' roles can be harnessed to suppress the spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia. One article² reported that there are at least three roles of religious leaders based on a structuring approach: reducing chaos in society (motivator), being a lighthouse of information on the COVID-19 pandemic (communicator), and setting an example or being a role model in society (idol). The study found that people of older age generally engage in spiritual activities on a regular basis and consider religious leaders to be reliable sources of information. This indicates that religious leaders can become social agents because they are seen as role models by older age groups. Therefore, convincing religious leaders to disseminate positive information about COVID-19 vaccination has great potential for effective messaging.³

2. People of older age can be motivated to get vaccinated via both family and community influences

In general, older people in the Magelang district of Central Java stated that they did not have any issue regarding accessibility to COVID-19 vaccination services. Information on vaccination schedules and vaccine brands is easily accessible and disseminated intensively through neighbourhood groups. Older people in the district are prioritised through a special COVID-19 vaccination program and, in certain cases, the local government provides transport services for them to get to and from vaccination centres. Some health facilities even work with nursing homes to ensure that people of older age are vaccinated.

People of older age will make the decision to be vaccinated based on influences from both within their family and from their broader community. In Central Java, men usually represent their families and they will accept the invitation to be vaccinated as directed by the head of their neighbourhood associations. These men also listen to their family members and children about vaccination because they want to keep their families safe. For women of older age, who are unsure about the safety of vaccines and therefore delay getting vaccinated, their spouses will proceed with vaccination to set an example and encouragement.

² Aula, SKN. (2020). The Role of Religious Leaders in Breaking the Chain of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesian Online Media. *Living Islam: Journal of Islamic Discourses* 3(1). <http://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/ushuluddin/li/article/view/2224>

³ Muchammadun, M. *et al.* (2021). The Role of Religious Figures in Handling the Spread of COVID-19. *Religious: Journal of Religions and Cross-Cultural Studies* 5(1). <http://doi.org/10.15575/rjsalb.v5i1.10378>



Another reason for vaccine hesitancy among older women was that some thought vaccination should first be given to younger family members because they are the ones who are still productive and need to stay healthy. In terms of community influence, the Government of Pekalongan City provides a vaccination program with prizes to encourage younger residents to take their older family members to get vaccinated.

3. Public education is required to reduce the reluctance of older people toward vaccination

Despite sufficient flow and distribution of technical information about vaccine types and brands, along with messaging around the availability of vaccination services, people of older age in Central Java continue to be skeptical about the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccination. Older people, especially those with comorbidities, should have access to in-depth consultation with health workers before being administered COVID-19 vaccines. This is to reduce their pre-vaccination anxiety, which may otherwise lead to a decision to reject vaccination. Men of older age also mentioned that they found both authorised health workers and the government to be trusted sources of information. In addition, some people requested more informative education because they require guidance on vaccines used in other countries to enable them to perform the Hajj or visit family abroad.

4. Older men are half-hearted about getting vaccinated

In the research study, both older men and women admitted that vaccination is a government program they must support. However, the study found that older men were reluctant to get vaccinated, but did so 'forcedly' because vaccine certificates are required for travelling out of town (on public transport) or receiving social assistance. It was also found that men in older age groups were not interested in taking the second and third vaccine doses.

In addition, some older men believed that COVID-19 was a fabrication and that certain parties benefited personally and collected wealth from COVID-19 vaccination and testing businesses. This has been triggered by what the men perceive as the inconsistency of government policies on COVID-19, conflicting information about how many vaccine doses are required, why certain vaccine brands are more widely available, and so on. Notably, this perception was absent among women of older age.⁴

Policy Options

New policy options are required to change communication patterns in disseminating information on COVID-19 vaccination and vaccine products in Central Java. To overcome negative public perceptions, the central and local governments need to take a more adaptive and targeted approach to informing the community in order to increase public trust in vaccination programs.

- a. At community level, it is necessary to work with religious and community leaders as role models to communicate directly with older age groups. In addition, it is necessary to identify other figures, including health workers and government personnel, who can be intermediaries in conveying information about COVID-19 vaccination.
- b. In terms of media choices, the central and local governments need to identify the channels commonly used by older people. These age groups have different habits than the gadget-savvy younger generations, and the social media they commonly use is generally limited to Facebook and WhatsApp groups. People of older age are more inclined to garner information through television programs or cultural events.

⁴ WHO, Kemenkes, UNICEF. (2020). COVID-19 Vaccine Acceptance Survey in Indonesia. <https://www.unicef.org/indonesia/media/7641/file/Survei%20Penerimaan%20Vaksin%20COVID-19.pdf>



Recommendation

For the older men of Central Java, information on the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination could be conveyed through cultural or religious events, for example, by using "wayang" puppet theatre shows. Delivering information through wayang performances will be effective for this group because of the cultural significance of the shows and because most of the audience is generally men.

For the province's older women, dialogue with religious leaders can be used as an effective strategy to alleviate vaccine hesitancy. The central and local governments can convince religious leaders about the safety, effectiveness, and *halalness* of COVID-19 vaccines. These governments can educate religious leaders that COVID-19 vaccines can be selected based on their ingredients, choosing brands that are believed to not contain prohibited substances through the Supreme Court Decision No. 31 of 2022 on material testing of Presidential Regulation No. 99 of 2020 on Procurement of Vaccines and the Implementation of Vaccinations in the context of Managing the Pandemic (COVID-19), more specifically in Article 2.

Central and local governments need to be more innovative in communicating COVID-19 information to people of older age and should adopt a more informal framework. This requires health promotion teams within the government to actively manage social media that are commonly used by older people. This may also involve using live interactive question-and-answer forums to prevent misinformation and hoaxes around COVID-19. In addition to social media, the integrated service post can be used as a medium for delivering messages to target older people and encourage the uptake of vaccination.

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For more information

Australia Indonesia Health Security Partnership (AIHSP)

International Financial Centre (IFC), Tower 2, Level 18, Jl. Jendral Sudirman Kav. 22-23 Jakarta 12920

Website: www.aihsp.or.id

E-mail: info@aihsp.or.id