Abstract: The use of vaccines and vaccination programs for Covid-19 became a widely prevalent practice all over the globe to curb the spread of the virus and put a check on the ongoing pandemic. Implementation of Covid-19 certificates or ‘vaccine passports’ (also known as ‘immunization passports’ or ‘digital health passes’) is another step in the same direction to control the spread of the virus by ensuring a method to slowly ease back into the regular ways of living and traveling. These certificates are also believed to promote vaccination amongst the public and ensure a higher vaccination rate and achievement of herd immunity. While it may seem like an excellent initiative to control the virus, various legal and ethical issues arise. We are familiar with the direct conflict and controversy around anti-vaxxers (people who refuse to get vaccinated), and the agenda furthered by the government to achieve public health and contain the spread of the virus. In addition, the usage of vaccine certificates is also an attention-worthy area that gives rise to several ethical concerns that might be overlooked as a second-order consequence of vaccination programs. This paper aims to expose ethical issues arising from using vaccine certificates and suggestions to deal with such issues mindfully and responsibly.

Keywords: COVID-19, vaccine passport, Covid-19 certificates, bioethics, ethics of vaccination, public health, herd immunity, human rights

Introduction: The emergence and widespread of the Covid-19 virus disrupted everyone’s lives and created disorder on a global level. The pandemic has not been easy on anyone on both personal and professional fronts. Given the novelty and severity of the virus, the government and higher authorities had to make difficult decisions like imposing lockdowns, levying fines on not wearing masks, and so on. In the same series of attempts to contain the spread of the virus, vaccination programs were highly promoted so that everyone gains immunity by taking doses of vaccines against Covid-19. Those vaccinated got a vaccination certificate, which is now being used to allow individuals to enter various public spaces and travel. Vaccination programs and certificates have been promoted to develop better immunization individually and as a community.
consequently, having better control over the spread of the virus. However, their use comes with its own set of complications and ethical issues.

Vaccine certificates or passports act as proof that a particular individual has been vaccinated against Covid-19 and is relatively safe herself. Moreover, vaccinated individuals also pose a lesser threat to people around in terms of spreading the virus. In many countries, vaccination certificates are being used as a mandatory requirement for traveling and as an eligibility criterion to enter institutions, offices, and public areas like restaurants, theatres, etc. As the name suggests, the vaccine ‘passport’ serves as a pass and adds a layer of added safety to the more significant cause of preventing the spread of Covid-19. Hall and Studdert write that the reasoning behind vaccination programs and certifications is to ensure the public health restrictions that limit public movement and social activities are “tailored to verifiable risk”\(^1\). From this perspective, there appears to be no issue with promoting and encouraging one to have a vaccine certificate. In fact, it seems to be a commendable approach. However, by reading between the lines and looking beyond the obvious, one can understand the problems with the unconditional and hastened implementation of the policy of vaccination certificates.

From an ethical perspective, the issue that arises here is the ramifications of using vaccine certificates. While their usage in itself might seem noble and harmless, it adversely affects those who choose not to get vaccinated. It becomes a moral question of how fair is it to limit their movement when Covid-19 restrictions are being relaxed based on the vaccination status. With the use of vaccination certificates, people can travel and access public places ranging from restaurants and movie theatres to educational institutes and offices. Now, the question arises isn’t it unfair for only vaccinated people to have such an advantage over those who did not get a dose? This is a major dilemma that we will be exploring from an ethical angle. How should the divide between vaccinated and unvaccinated people be dealt with? What is the best way to work towards the goal of attaining the best public health while there are people who make a personal choice of remaining to be unvaccinated? These are major concerns that crop up around the use of vaccination certificates.

Osama and others speak of the use of vaccine passports as a ‘minefield’ that the governments should be careful walking through\(^2\). As scholars of philosophy and bioethics, it becomes one’s responsibility to dig deeper and bring out the ethical issues related to mandatory usage of vaccine certificates.

A document by the UNESCO World Commission for the Ethics of Science and Technology (COMEST) and the UNESCO International Bioethics Committee (IBC) highlights the ethical issues associated of Covid-19 certificates and vaccination passports\(^3\). It is a good starting point for developing a basic, relatively unbiased understanding of the issues at hand as it covers a wide variety of major ethical concerns followed by guidelines to deal with them in the best possible manner. Thus, this statement by UNESCO is used as the basic framework of this paper, and its content is central to the discussion of this paper.

In order to introduce vaccine passports, nations first need to have the privilege of having a sufficient vaccine supply. If there is a vaccine shortage, such countries face a