Social/cultural challenges on vitamin A and iron status in infants and young children (IYC) in Machakos and Makueni Counties, Kenya

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Background:

Food insecurity and traditional feeding practices (taboos, social, cultural influences) both contribute to malnutrition. Traditional feeding practices affect the “utilization” aspect of food security. Food may be available, affordable and accessible but due to traditional beliefs, a group might be prohibited from consuming certain types of food, which eventually limits their micronutrient intake. The effect of gender favouritism on the nutrition of infants and young children has not been extensively studied, although in most developing countries nutrition status is influenced by social cultural and traditional feeding practices with gender biases more likely in favour of the male child. These can contribute to differences in prevalence of malnutrition between boys and girls related to disparities in levels of micronutrient intake.

Objective: This study examines relationships and determinants of vitamin A and iron in infants and young children, with a focus on variations and differences of micronutrient levels and dietary diversity score between female and male children (6-36 months) as influenced by culture and taboos.

Results

Information from Focus group discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of food forbidden</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Kathiliko&quot; meat from goat stomach.</td>
<td>Causes a lot of anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat</td>
<td>delay in speaking and stammering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>animal heads, liver, eggs, honey and fats</td>
<td>Infant grows large causing birth difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raw animal blood</td>
<td>For men only to cure low libido</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Wao&quot; a traditional vegetable at flowering stage</td>
<td>Causes dizziness in children</td>
</tr>
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Discussion:

High prevalence of Iron Deficiency Anemia (IDA) in IYC is caused by low intake in foods rich in heme iron (meat, organ meat) with high Vitamin A Deficiency (VAD) attributable to low intakes of animal sources which are rich source of preformed Vitamin A. This is a reflection of the effect traditions and beliefs have on the DDS based on qualitative data gathered from the focus group discussion.

Conclusion: The few areas still upholding cultural beliefs around diet have an overall impact, as it lowers the DDS which in turn, causes a decrease in both macro and micronutrient intake which is eventually reflected in the nutrition status of the affected group.

Specific objectives and methodology:

1. Understanding of cultural influences, taboos and feeding practice on gender differences and nutrition status of Infants and Young Children (IYC)
2. Assessment of effect of mothers/caregiver’s demographic characteristics and economic status on the nutritional status of their IYC
3. Assessment of relationship between Dietary Diversity Score (DDS) and micronutrients (Vitamin A and Iron)
4. Investigation of differences in DDS between boys and girls
5. Investigation of differences in anthropometric indicators between boys and girls

Study site and sample size

- Eastern Province of Kenya in Makueni and Machakos Counties.
- Average temperatures in the area around 20.2°C-24°C, with a high evaporation rate.
- Sample size (n=277) mother (15-49 years) and baby (6-36 months) pairs.

References:

4. Shell-Duncan B, McCabe T. Cultural and environmental barriers to adequate iron intake among northern Kenyan schoolchildren. Food &#38; Nutrition Bulletin. 2005

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