

Men as positive agents of change

FINDINGS FROM A FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The Infant & Young Child Nutrition (IYCN) Project conducted a formative assessment in Kenya's Western and Eastern Provinces to learn how to best engage men in support of healthy maternal dietary and infant and young child feeding practices. The IYCN Project performed the formative assessment as part of a larger, ongoing effort to evaluate the effect of engaging fathers and grandmothers in maternal and infant and young child nutrition, especially within the context of those affected by HIV. The purpose of the overall evaluation is to test the hypothesis that families benefit from activities that involve men and grandmothers in nutrition decisions because they possess more knowledge and make better nutrition decisions than families who have not been targeted by these activities.

Focus group discussions with fathers of children younger than 2 years informed the results and reveal that men have very clear ideas about their roles as fathers, their roles as heads of households, and their responsibilities for family nutrition. This document summarizes the results of the assessment, which have been used to develop a community-based intervention to engage men in support of healthy household nutrition practices in Western Province, Kenya.

Men's positive concept of the father role

As the primary head of the household, fathers feel responsible for their family's livelihood, and others in the household look to them for guidance. In order to give direction to their households, fathers reported that they plan each day's activities on the previous day.

"My father tells me that I should know how the baby is faring. I should not leave the care of children to the mother only. He tells me that I should look for employment and not stay at home all the time, so that I can get money to buy milk for the child and also provide for the family."

— Father, Shivuli (Western Province)



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Men's daily activities

When men first wake up in the morning, they typically make sure their homesteads are secure. They then attend to their cattle. Fathers will also check that their children have eaten breakfast and have gone to school. During the day, men work on their own farms or for wages so that they can take care of their families. At the end of the day, they bring home food or give money they have earned to their wives to buy food for the family. While the family waits for the mother to prepare supper, the father discusses what happened at school that day with the children and helps them with their assignments.

"I have to look for casual work each day so that I can pay school fees, buy clothes and food for the children. As a man, saying you have children is nothing. Bringing them up is what counts."

— Father, Kithimu (Eastern Province)

Roles and responsibilities of father in the family

A father's main role is to provide for his family's needs. This includes paying for food, clothing, shelter, school fees, transport fares, and hospital bills. Fathers also provide security to family members. One father defined security as "going out of [his] way to ensure his family is protected against diseases, hunger, or any other threat."



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Men view themselves as providers for the family; central to this is their role in providing food. They are socialized that their role involves “searching and bringing” food for the family on a daily basis; however, beyond that, men reiterated that they have no further input in the way the food is prepared, because “that is not our work as men.” As long as they provide food or money to purchase food for the family, they feel they have done what is expected. They want to be appreciated, because as one man in Shivuli asserted, “I have fulfilled my role.”

“Quality is not the issue. If I manage to bring home two ngolongolos of maize (4 kgs), the family has something to eat for the day. I have done my work. How the food is cooked and with what else it is mixed is the business of women in the family.”

— Father, Shivuli (Western Province)

Roles and responsibilities of fathers in family nutrition

Caring for the children is the responsibility of both parents, but each parent has different roles. Mothers

are in charge of selecting and preparing the foods that children eat. If they can afford it, some men pay milk suppliers to provide milk for their children. Men also encourage their wives to feed the children a variety of fruits, beans, and vegetables.

“We also advise them [mothers] on the foods to be given to young children. Young children should be given different foods—not just porridge only. They should be given other foods such as fruits and beans—foods that can build the baby’s body.”

— Father, Ivakhale (Western Province)

Typical meals and dietary practices for families

A normal meal consists of the staple *ugali* (stiff maize meal), accompanied by traditional vegetables. A typical breakfast consists of milk, milk tea or black tea, porridge, and sweet potatoes. Lunch generally consists of sweet potatoes, yams, or cassava with porridge. Generally, young children eat more frequently and in smaller quantities than the rest of the family.

In some families, everyone eats together; however, it is not unusual for mothers to eat first, together with the younger children, while fathers eat separately, sometimes with the older siblings. It was underscored that most fathers prefer eating by themselves, or in some families, fathers come home late, after everyone else has eaten, so they end up eating alone:

“When I am out working, my wife will cook at 6 pm for the children and feed them by 7 pm, when she also eats her dinner. When I reach home at 9 pm, I eat alone. Sometimes, the food is cold and I cannot light the fire to warm it, so most times, I prefer eating in the hotel.”

— Father, Karurumo (Eastern Province)

Specific tasks performed by fathers related to family food provision

Men grow food on their farms and engage in casual wage labor so they can buy food from the market. Such food includes fruit, flour, sugar, cooking fat, dry maize, tea, coffee, and cocoa. Men grow maize and sell it along with milk to provide the family with additional income, some of which is used to purchase food

“To tell the truth, I’m just a true African man. Issues to do with caring for small children [are] the mother’s business. If the child needs to take porridge, I make sure the porridge is there. I don’t even know what she’ll add to it, but if she says she would like to add something, I provide her money so that she can buy...”

— Father, Shivuli (Western Province)

Roles in the health care of mothers and children

In both provinces, men explained that accompanying a woman to the clinic is uncommon, largely because it is perceived as a woman’s responsibility. Men in Western Province reported that it was their role to ensure that women attend the clinic so they get information and education about how to feed infants and young children properly. Fathers, however, usually only accompany their wife just after delivery, to help carry the baby. Men see their role as providing money to go to the clinic and to carry out recommendations by health workers. Fathers provide the food, supplements, and medicines recommended by the clinic to ensure that a pregnancy is healthy. Men said they also support their wives by providing special foods that health workers recommend for their children. Some are willing to allow their wife to reduce her workload

when advised by a health worker, especially during the last trimester of pregnancy. A man at Kithimu gave an example of support to his wife during her last pregnancy:

“Last year, my wife went for prenatal clinic and the doctor told her to stop doing heavy work. I didn’t ask her for the reason but allowed her to do simple chores until she delivered.”

— Father, Kithimu (Eastern Province)

Attitudes toward exclusive breastfeeding

Men at Kithimu and Karurumo in Eastern Province were aware that doctors recommend children should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life. When mothers work outside the home, however, they believe that it is difficult for mothers to exclusively breastfeed for six months.

“Most of the women I know leave very early and return late in the evening. One cannot just keep the child until evening waiting, so buy some milk for the child to take while she is away. If she decides to stay at home and not go out, she still cannot just stay at home for a whole six months—all because of breastfeeding—so that makes it difficult to breastfeed for the first six months.”

— Father, Ivakhale (Western Province)

The participants in Eastern Province suggested that fathers could be of more help to mothers by keeping the mothers healthy through the provision of nutritious food and ensuring that the mothers get enough rest. They also suggested that they could spend more time with their wives, avoid domestic conflicts, and use family planning so they do not conceive within six months of delivery. In the Western



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Province focus groups, men described one of their roles as providing adequate food for mothers who are breastfeeding.

Advice given to men

Fathers feel strongly that they need information on how to support good health and nutrition among young children in their families.

“[Men] yearn for information on child rearing, but are concerned that accompanying their wives to the clinic or for seminars on such issues will make them appear as weak.”

— A community leader in Western Province

Friends and older, respected men are most frequently the ones who provide advice to men. Religious institutions also play an important advisory role: some church ministers invite health experts, such as community health volunteers, to teach the congregation during some of their Sunday church services.

Men reported that they want information on how to prevent diseases and infections that affect young children, how to keep children comfortable at home, how to encourage children to do their work and be independent, and how to support them to do well in school. Discussions with fathers revealed that men listen to and respect people who are perceived as professionals or knowledgeable on issues of health and nutrition. Generally, they will not listen to someone unless they know he or she has received some training and “knows what they are talking about.”

Next steps

The IYCN Project is currently evaluating the impact of male engagement on infant feeding and maternal dietary practices in Kenya’s Western Province. This research involves 85 men and their families using training materials and community mobilization tools, some of which are listed in the additional resources section below. These community-based activities targeting men are being implemented and evaluated along with activities to engage grandmothers. This research will lead to grandmothers and men having increased nutrition knowledge and adopting better practices related to supporting maternal nutrition and complementary feeding.

Available resources

- **Engaging men to increase support for optimal infant feeding in Western Kenya.** This brief describes IYCN’s pilot activities to integrate infant and young child nutrition into existing community-level male involvement activities in Kenya’s Western Province.
- **Infant and Young Child Feeding and Gender: A training manual for male group leaders.** This manual provides instructions to facilitate a two-day training workshop to provide male group leaders with knowledge and skills needed to share information and encourage discussions on gender issues and optimal infant and young child feeding. The manual’s learning activities include focused discussions, problem-solving, group work, brainstorming, and role playing to introduce issues such as breastfeeding, complementary feeding, counseling and testing for HIV, and prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV.
- **Infant and Young Child Feeding and Gender: A participant manual for male group leaders.** This participants’ manual serves as a reference for male group leaders who have participated in the two-day training described above, and includes summaries of key content, suggested questions to promote discussion, and activities that group leaders can use when facilitating their group sessions.
- **Engaging Grandmothers and Men in Infant and Young Child Feeding and Maternal Nutrition: Report on a formative assessment in Eastern and Western Kenya.** The report documents knowledge, attitudes, and practices around infant and young child feeding; maternal dietary practices; and the roles of fathers and grandmothers; and includes recommendations on how to design culturally relevant interventions for engagement of fathers and grandmothers to support and improve maternal, infant, and young child feeding in Eastern and Western Provinces, Kenya.
- **The Role and Influence of Grandmothers and Men: Evidence supporting a family-focused approach to optimal infant and young child nutrition.** This literature review discusses the evidence on the influence of grandmothers and men on child nutrition and offers recommendations to strengthen strategies and increase program results for community nutrition intervention planners.

Visit www.iycn.org to access these resources.

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The Infant & Young Child Nutrition Project is funded by the United States Agency for International Development. The project is led by PATH and includes three partners: CARE, The Manoff Group, and University Research Co., LLC. For more information, please contact info@iycn.org or visit www.iycn.org.