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Study on Gender Roles and Norms Related to Nutrition Practices, Including Husbands' Engagement and Women's Empowerment

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About USAID Advancing Nutrition

USAID Advancing Nutrition is the Agency's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project, led by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and a diverse group of experienced partners. Launched in September 2018, USAID Advancing Nutrition implements nutrition interventions across sectors and disciplines for USAID and its partners. The project's multi-sectoral approach draws together global nutrition experience to design, implement, and evaluate programs that address the root causes of malnutrition. Committed to using a systems approach, USAID Advancing Nutrition strives to sustain positive outcomes by building local capacity, supporting behavior change, and strengthening the enabling environment to save lives, improve health, build resilience, increase economic productivity, and advance development.

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Acronyms

<i>bulamyk</i>	national porridge
FGD	focus group discussion
<i>kompot</i>	a thick, sweet fruit drink
<i>kumgan</i>	jug with a bowl
<i>lagman</i>	meat, vegetables, and pulled noodles
<i>manty</i>	boiled or steamed dumplings with meat filling
<i>mastava</i>	meat and rice soup
<i>ochok</i>	outdoor fireplace
<i>oromo</i>	steamed dough pie
<i>plov/ash</i>	meat, vegetable, and rice stew
<i>samsy</i>	savory pastry bun stuffed with meat
<i>shorpo</i>	meat broth with potato, carrots, fresh herbs
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

Executive Summary

USAID Advancing Nutrition’s main objective is to improve the nutritional status of women of reproductive age (ages 15–49) and children under five in the Kyrgyz Republic, with a specific focus on the “1,000-day window of opportunity.” The project’s interventions are primarily designed to improve household-level nutrition practices, shift social and gender norms, and strengthen linkages to health services.

The main objective of this study was to collect evidence on gender roles and norms in areas in which the project operates and analyze possible shifts occurring as a result of project activities. The study is based on 36 individual interviews and 14 focus group discussions. Qualitative data were gathered during fieldwork in March 2022 in urban and rural areas of the Batken and Jalal-Abad *oblasts* of Kyrgyzstan (which are the two regions of USAID Advancing Nutrition’s intervention).

The study focuses on six themes: feeding, dietary diversity and anemia, hygiene and sanitation, food storage, household budgeting, and social and behavior change (SBC) messaging. This report presents and discusses the study’s main empirical findings and develops recommendations to inform future project interventions.

Specific findings for each of these themes are summarized and illustrated with quotes from respondents. The study’s more general findings are:

- Respondents identified all themes in this study, except for the one on household budgeting, as women’s responsibility. Accordingly, women, and particularly daughters-in-law, carry the main responsibility for feeding all household members, creating hygienic conditions, and storing/preserving food. Additionally, women acquire knowledge on these themes, such as from project interventions, and disseminate it within the household.
- The study documents ways in which (Kyrgyz) household labor division is gendered in regard to nutrition-related behaviors. In the household and nutrition domains, men can be mobilized for substantial contributions only in exceptional situations of need, and thus act only as temporary substitutes for women, not as equally contributing partners. However, the study also shows that households and their members make pragmatic adjustments to prevailing notions of gender roles, at least selectively and temporarily. Participation, labor contribution, and decision-making leverage in the household and nutrition domain is thus subject to negotiation between men and women and across generations, which marks a favorable entry-point for project activities. The study documents joint decision-making as a social process that is negotiated between different (gendered) interests to arrive at some form of compromise. These compromises mostly favor male preferences, which reflects the continuing dominance of the patriarchal system. However, there is also evidence that the Kyrgyz patriarchal system does allow for pragmatic, exceptional adjustments. For example, women are able to influence the purchases of food items and introduce new, healthier dishes and ingredients to the household’s diet plan.
- Basic knowledge of feeding, dietary diversity, hygiene and sanitation, and food storage is widespread among all respondents. Women, and particularly daughters-in-law, were clearly more knowledgeable than husbands and fathers-in-law. The fact that daughters-in-law shared new knowledge with other household members appeared to be positively recognized and appreciated.
- In terms of attitudes about gender and nutrition, the study documented a general receptiveness for innovation. This did not go so far that respondents revealed a readiness for fundamental changes to the established labor division or a gender role-reversal. For most themes, however, respondents clearly articulated interest in ‘trying out new things’ and being open to change.

- In practice, the degree or extent of implemented change is limited and does not match the acquired knowledge or proclaimed open attitude. For example, despite minor adjustments required to prepare a new dish, there has been no significant change in the small rotation of Kyrgyz traditional dishes, which often are fried and have too much fat and carbohydrates.
- The everyday *modus operandi* of the gender-nutrition nexus can thus be characterized as ‘pragmatic conservatism.’ The study documents instances of such pragmatic conservatism (e.g., mothers-in-law and fathers, even if temporarily, take over household and nutrition tasks when daughters-in-law are occupied with other chores).

The general recommendation is that future project interventions develop a more distinct focus on translating existent knowledge and selectively open attitude to ‘change through practice’ (with the subsequent objective that these new behaviors will be assigned desirable socio-cultural value). The study’s recommendations for each theme include:

- In SBC messaging, consider composing and introducing tangible role models, for instance ‘the modern mother-in-law’ or ‘the responsible father,’ who advocate to ease the multiple, time-intensive burdens of daughters-in-law and associate such behavior with positive socio-cultural values.
- Consider measures to increase the exchange between daughters- and mothers-in-law about new, healthy recipes (that they already discuss based on their joint access to Internet-based content). Facilitate the formation of female cross-generational alliances within households to increase opportunities to further diversify household diets, especially because mothers-in-law are influential in deciding which dishes are prepared.
- Increase awareness that freezing vegetables is a time-efficient and cost-saving preservation method. In addition, promote the understanding that the quality of frozen vegetables complies with the prevalent cultural value of eating ‘fresh’ meals. Develop hands-on approaches for the audience to experience the positive effect of using frozen food, such as through village-based cooking competitions.
- With 50–80 percent of monthly household budgets assigned to food consumption, promote ways for households to better plan and strategically approach their food purchase decisions. Efforts could be made to expand the notion of a ‘family meal’ that all members consume on a day, even if this demands coordination, compromise, and sometimes consuming leftovers.
- Identify measures that jointly and in alliance daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law command significant budget setting power, given that they prepare the lists of food items that a household purchases.

Project Description, Background, and Objectives

Project Description

USAID Advancing Nutrition’s main objective is to improve the nutritional status of women of reproductive age (ages 15–49) and children under five in the Kyrgyz Republic, with a specific focus on the “1,000-day window of opportunity.” More specifically, the project aspires to improve ‘nutrition-related behaviors through enhanced social and behavior change (SBC) at individual, household, and population level,’ and to improve ‘the quality of nutrition services within the health system.’¹ Due to gender and power dynamics within households, mothers’ behaviors are heavily influenced/mandated by others, such as their husbands and mothers-in-law. Published data shows that increased joint control of productive resources, and increased joint decision-making, improve nutrition and health outcomes for women and children.²

USAID Advancing Nutrition aims to increase couples’ communication and encourage joint-decision making associated with selected nutrition behaviors. The project intends to influence decision-making behaviors and women’s empowerment through gender-transformative nutrition messaging at the household and community levels. Through online trainings, USAID Advancing Nutrition will train and mentor community activists to integrate nutrition SBC that addresses gender norms.

All of USAID Advancing Nutrition’s SBC activities are designed to improve household-level nutrition practices, shift social and gender norms, and strengthen linkages to health services. Specifically, the project has implemented the following six SBC modules with gender-transformative content to promote equitable roles and decision making:

- Exclusive breastfeeding - Gender focus: Increase couple’s communication and decision-making power of mothers on feeding the child exclusively with breast milk until six months of age.
- Complementary feeding – Gender focus: Increase couple’s communication and decision-making power of mothers on introducing the solid and semi-solid food starting at six months.
- Hygiene and sanitation – Gender focus: Increase couple’s communication and decision-making power of women on availability of soap and water at household handwashing stations.
- Dietary diversity - Gender focus: Increase couple’s communication and decision-making power of women on diversifying the diet in households.
- Home budgeting - Gender focus: Increase couple’s communication and decision-making power of women on budgeting and money allocation in households.
- Storage and preservation – Gender focus: Increase the couple's communication and decision-making power of women on procurement of nutritious products for consumption within the household.

Background

The main source of background information is the project’s baseline study (October–November 2020) to measure baseline levels of 20 outcome indicators related to nutrition practices. The study sampled 2,091 women who resided either in Jalal-Abad or in Batken and had a child below two years of age. It

¹ https://www.advancingnutrition.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/usaaid_an_kyrgyz_one_pager_trilingual.pdf (last accessed Dec. 2, 2021).

² Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in the context of Food Security and Nutrition, 2020.

http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs1920/Gender/GEWE_Scoping_Paper-FINAL040ct.pdf (last accessed May 12, 2022).

provided valuable information on many of the themes that were identified as relevant for this gender study.

In terms of women's dietary diversity, the baseline found that 88 percent of respondents consumed five or more of 10 food groups, particularly vitamin A-rich fruits, vegetables, and meats. However, less than half of the baseline respondents indicated consuming certain highly nutrient-rich food groups, such as eggs, dark green leafy vegetables, and legumes.

About 50 percent of respondents with children 0–5 months of age stated exclusively breastfeeding, while the other half also offered their child supplementary food items. Eighty-two percent of women claimed to continue breastfeeding their children 6–23 months of age.

About one-third of women declared giving water to infants 0–5 months in addition to breast milk. Forty percent of children 6–23 months of age were reported to consume sugar-sweetened beverages and 73 percent consumed tea.

The baseline found that 88 percent of children 6–8 months of age received soft and semi-solid foods to complement the continued provision of breastmilk during the day before the survey interview. While 66 percent of children 6–23 months consumed at least five of eight recognized food groups (the score to amount to 'minimum dietary diversity'), only 24 percent were reported to have been fed the minimum recommended number of times (minimum meal frequency). Sugary and processed foods were identified to be among the most consumed items by children below two years of age.

The baseline found that 95 percent of households preserve and/or store food items for consumption during the winter. Mostly, these were apples, peaches, pears, pomegranates, cherries/wild cherries, plums, cucumbers, and tomatoes.

All women reported to have at least a handwashing station with soap at home. But only one-third reported regularly washing their hands at three of five critical moments (after using the toilet, before feeding the child, before food preparation, before eating, and before cleaning the child's bottom).

As to the dissemination of project-related messages, the baseline reports that 37 percent of respondents had seen TV spots on food and hygiene on local channels. As much as 85 percent stated receipt of information on hygiene, nutrition for pregnant women and mothers, breastfeeding, and supplementary foods for children. For most women, local medical institutions represented the primary source of information, next to the Internet, television, and relatives. More than half of the female respondents claimed sharing information about hygiene, breastfeeding, and proper nutrition with others in the family and wider social circles.

Study Objectives

The request for proposal defines the main work objective as conducting a qualitative study of gender roles and norms in areas in which the project operates and analyzing the possible shifts occurring as a result of project activities. The study focuses on husbands' engagement and women's empowerment at household level related to selected practices covered by the six SBC modules, as follows:

- Identify prevailing beliefs and practices related to gender and nutrition among women and other household influencers.
- Identify how gender influences decisions related to selected nutrition practices and home budgeting, especially the extent to which couples make joint decisions.
- Identify barriers to and facilitators of joint decision making and women's empowerment, including the factors mentioned above.
- Recommend actions that USAID Advancing Nutrition could take to improve messaging related to gender.

Methodology and Approach

Study Design, Sample, and Guiding Questions

The study is based on 36 individual interviews and 14 focus group discussions (FGDs) in Kyrgyzstan March 23–31, 2022. Participants were identified through local health facility staff in in randomly selected villages and cities within the project area.

Eighteen individual interviews were conducted in Jalal-Abad and 18 in Batken. Table 1 shows respondent distribution by participant, settlement type, and region.

Table 1. Individual Interviewees

Participant	Rural		Urban		Total
	Batken	Jalal-Abad	Batken	Jalal-Abad	
Mother	3	4	3	3	13
Father	3	3	3	3	12
Mother-in-law	2	1	3	2	8
Father-in-law	1	1	0	1	3
Total	9	9	9	9	36

The individual interviews were based on a guideline of questions that covered the following themes: feeding, dietary diversity & anemia, hygiene & sanitation, food storage, household budgeting, and SBC messaging. Feeding included exclusive breastfeeding and/or complementary feeding, depending on the respondent’s household situation. Individual interviews lasted 20–35 minutes, depending on participant responsiveness.

The interview and FGD guideline is included as annex I of this report. Most importantly, they pursued the following four methodological objectives:

- Identify key terminology and viewpoints (emic framing/view from the inside).
- Extract at least one incident, event, or ‘story’ on the study’s topic from the respondent’s own experience (case-study).
- Understand whether the case is typical within the respondent’s own life or that of others he or she is intimately aware (patterns).
- Have the respondent react to hypothetical scenarios that map possibilities and boundaries of in/acceptable behavior (counterfactual imagination).

Of the 14 FGDs, seven each were conducted in Jalal-Abad and Batken. Table 2 shows FGD distribution by participant, settlement type, and region).

Table 2. Number of FGDs, by Participant and Location

Participant	Rural		Urban		Total
	Batken	Jalal-Abad	Batken	Jalal-Abad	
Mothers	1	1	1	1	4
Fathers	1	1	1	1	4
Mothers-in-law	1	1	1	1	4
Fathers-in-law	1	1	0	0	2
Total	4	4	3	3	14

In coordination with the project team, the researchers decided against gender-mixed FGDs with mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law to avoid women getting a passive role in the presence of (elder) men. The adjustment was to organize two separate FGDs with only fathers-in-law in rural areas.

The FGDs addressed the same general themes as the individual interviews, and lasted for about 120 minutes, including breaks. The number of participants ranged between 5 and 16. In total, 168 individuals participated in the 14 FGDs.

During the FGDs, participants were divided into three working groups. Each was tasked with discussing two of the six themes. Each was also asked to produce a visualization, in the form of a diagram, list, graph, or drawing that summarized the discussion.

In the second part of the FGDs, groups were confronted with statements or sentences that were designed to trigger either an affirmative or dissenting reaction, and then a discussion. For example, the food storage working group was asked to respond to ‘Freezing vegetables is good.’

Data Analysis

After the completion of individual interviews and FGDs, the audio recordings were translated into English. These transcripts were reviewed and imported into MAXQDA. The original codebook was refined and finalized after coding several transcripts. All transcripts were then coded and analyzed across the different themes outlined in the guidelines and across the participant categories, region, settlement type, and source (interview, FGD).

Strengths and Limitations

The study was designed to produce empirical evidence that is ethnographic and can be analyzed with a qualitatively. Its main purpose was to gain in-depth understanding on the daily handling of six nutrition-related themes in Kyrgyz households: feeding, dietary diversity and anemia, hygiene and sanitation, food storage, household budgeting, and SBC messaging. The purpose of the study was not to produce quantitative findings that would aspire for a representative picture on these nutrition-related themes.

Gender was as the study’s primary cross-cutting category, but generational variation, regional embedding, and settlement type were considered as well. Across these categories, the study was attentive to prevalent cultural notions about nutrition and explored their effect on practices at the household micro-level. The findings are relevant because they reveal the positioning of women vis-à-vis other household members and their decision-making potential emanating from it. Beyond that, the insights are a starting point for a questionnaire-based study to measure the project’s impact among a larger sample of the intended audience.

The two main biases that the study encountered concerned respondent selection and social desirability. Most respondents were selected from the regular clientele of the local medical points or clinics (where also interviews and FGDs were conducted). Accordingly, households and women who irregularly attend prenatal, postnatal, and early childhood care could be potentially underrepresented in this study. (The project baseline study, for example, notes that women with higher education levels were more likely to visit a health facility.)

Scheduled interviews and FGDs unavoidably carry the risk of a social desirability bias, meaning respondents might present themselves and their living situations in a more favorable and likeable way than is actually the case. This occurs more in cases when the awareness about undesirable habits or practices is widespread and thus there is an evidently 'good answer' (e.g., 'I do not allow my children to drink soda'). With approaches such as 'participant observation' or 'house visits' not viable because of the study's timeline, the research team attempted to increase the credibility and authenticity of answers by engaging respondents in a conversation during which follow-up questions were posed that required specific responses.

Study Results and Findings

Prior to presenting the findings, it is critical to reflect on the actually observable effect of the categorizations that guided the study's sample design: gender, generation (parents/grandparents), settlement type, and administrative region.

Differences in viewpoints and practices related to nutrition were observable among gender and generation. These will be discussed in the thematic sections as relevant. However, the data revealed only minimal and largely insignificant differences in nutrition-related viewpoints and practices between settlement type and administrative region. This means that respondents' articulation on nutrition were generally similar regardless of whether they lived in a rural or urban area, and whether they lived in Jalal-Abad or Batken. The minor exceptions from this general observation are mentioned in the thematic sections as relevant.

Furthermore, respondent insights did not significantly differ between interviews and FGDs. For the most part, this can be attributed to the fact that FGD participants were very open to sharing their individual viewpoints and experiences, even if they differed from those of other participants. All FGDs were characterized by a non-hierarchical, receptive atmosphere that allowed all participants to contribute.

The study uses the terms 'wife,' 'mother,' or 'daughter-in-law' interchangeably when talking about a female caregiver of the generation between children and grandparents. The study uses the terms 'husband' or 'father' for male caregivers of the generation between children and grandparents. 'Mother-in-law' and 'father-in-law' refer to the oldest generation in a household. In all cases presented in this study, these were the parents of the male caregiver, in line with Kyrgyzstan's system of patrilocal residence after marriage (i.e., the wife lives with her husband and parents).

Theme I: Feeding

Child Feeding in Practice

Basic knowledge about exclusive breastfeeding and complementary feeding in line with the project information appears to be very widespread, also among fathers.

In practice, deviations from these recommendations included providing the child with water or other liquids too early and despite breastfeeding (believing that exclusive breastfeeding is insufficient). Beyond that, some women were highly knowledgeable about recent nutrition insights. Many of these had received this knowledge through the local medical facility (feldsher midwifery point (*FAP*) or clinic). But there were also many others who stated having obtained basic knowledge from non-project related sources, such as the Internet or during a stay abroad (as labor migrants).

Breastfeeding is usually practiced exclusively until about six months, but rarely beyond the first year. Added food items after six months are mostly fruits, soups, and other 'light dishes.' Complementary feeding with unhealthy food items, such as cookies, is very rarely practiced, according to respondents. Once children are no longer exclusively breastfed, mothers regularly receive help from other household members, primarily mothers-in-law and secondarily fathers, who then feed children or prepare food. However, 'playful' approaches to child feeding (e.g., pretending a spoon is an airplane) were rarely mentioned.

Daughters-in-law are the primary caretakers for feeding their children (breastfeeding and complementary feeding). They did not articulate feeling pressured by other household members about their child feeding practices. Some daughters-in-law reported misunderstandings with their mothers-in-law on this topic, but most then gave the impression that it was eventually they who could decide the course of action. Generally, mothers-in-law were portrayed by different groups of respondents as understanding and non-interfering. There appeared to be no significant conflict of knowledge between

women of different generations. When comparing feeding approaches between mothers and mothers-in-law, respondents widely agreed that the latter had more 'patience' and this was appreciated. Mothers-in-law therefore seem suited to support their daughters-in-law in the domain of responsive feeding, which demands time, persistence, and attentiveness.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- How do you typically feed your one-year-old granddaughter? "She is breastfed. In addition, she eats porridge. Her mother gives her little pieces from bananas and apples." (Father-in-law, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- "I have one child, 1.5 years old...I usually feed [a meal] three times per day and snacks twice." Do you breastfeed? "No, I do not." How long did you breastfeed? "I did it for one year and five months." What do you usually feed your child? "I feed normal food that we usually eat [in the household]. I try to give light food." (Mother, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- How do you feed your grandchild? "After 6 months, we started giving additional food...We gave vitamins or necessary things like pumpkins, fruits, beans, buckwheat, and others...I like to cook different food rather than carrots and rice." (Mother-in-law, rural Batken, interview)
- "I have one child. He is three months old." What are you feeding? "The main food is breastmilk, nothing else. A little bit of boiled water." (Father, urban Batken, interview)
- How did you feed your child in the first six months? "He used to be breastfed. I remember that my wife used to make apple puree and carrot juice. She did not give food that the elders ate." How about now, when he is 13 months old? "She stopped breastfeeding when he was one year old. We have a goat at home, so she gives goat milk in the evening. Before, my wife [gives him] the food we all eat at home." (Father, urban Batken, interview)
- "I have only one child. He is 13 months old." How do you typically feed your child? "I know that we have to breastfeed until babies are two years old, but I made it only until my baby was 13 months old. In the morning, I give porridge. For lunch, I make beef or sheep broth. I also make meatballs. Usually, he eats what we eat." (Mother, urban Batken, interview)
- "I have two children. One is two years old and the younger one is six months old." How do you typically feed your [younger] child? "I do not give any additional food. I am just breastfeeding. When will you start adding other food? "After he is six months old." What are you planning to give? "I would like to give *shorpo* and other liquid dishes." (Mother, rural Batken, interview)
- "Mothers-in-law are patient and experienced. They give us advice on feeding a child." (Mother, urban Batken, FGD)
- Do you sometimes disagree with your mother-in-law? "Yes, sometimes we do not agree and suggest our own ideas. For example, when a child is sick and has a fever, the mother-in-law might not feed the child properly. We might suggest giving more liquid. They understand." "In the past, people did give additional food when the babies were not even six months old. We are also not giving water when they are six months old." (Mothers, rural Batken, FGD)
- Do you always agree with what your mother-in-law suggests to you about how to feed a child? "Well, sometimes we do not agree, because they rely on older methods, while we use new methods. For example, if she suggests *bulamyk*, I just make porridge for my child." Can you tell me about old and new methods? "For example, the old method is when they chew food in their mouth and give it to the children. It is not good to give any food taken from people's mouths. She [the mother-in-law] also says it is alright to give fried food to a child, but for a six-month-

old baby it is not healthy.” “For example, sometimes when the baby is younger than six months, mothers-in-law say that the mother is not breastfeeding well. So they tell the mother to supplement the breast milk with food...We cannot say anything because we respect them.” (Mothers, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)

Feeding Challenges and Conditions

Respondents said that they did not face major challenges when preparing food, regardless of diverging material conditions such as availability of running (hot/cold), water and gas, and whether they prepared food inside the house on a fire or electric stove, or outside with *ochok*. Some respondents mentioned unstable electricity, to which they adjusted by cooking over fire.

Respondents did not mention insufficient knowledge, inadequate places for feeding, or a lack of privacy as challenges. Some women, especially those who were not exclusively housewives or homemakers, identified a limited amount of time for feeding or preparing food as a challenge. Regular adjustments to this were to cook something simpler and faster, or to seek help from others (i.e., husbands or mothers-in-law).

Questions and selected representative answers:

- What are the main challenges in preparing food? “I do not see any challenges. We do not have gas. If there is no electricity, we can cook outside on the fire. It is not difficult.” (Father, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- You said that it is tasty to cook on the fire stove, but does it not take longer to cook? “The electricity is a problem. If you cook on the electric stove, it will take longer to cook, because it is not as hot. We do not have gas, but some people have it. Electricity is a problem in cold seasons. We are also used to cooking outside.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- What challenges do you have while cooking? “Electricity might be off. We have to make fire [then] in *ochok*.” (Father, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- “We do not have gas, so we cook outside and it can be a challenge.” Why is it difficult? “We do not have [enough] wood to burn. It is difficult for daughters-in-law to find wood when they have a child. We have electric stoves and ovens, but we cannot use them much, because...the electricity is not stable.” (Mothers-in-law, rural Batken, FGD)
- Do you have other challenges? “Time is a challenge. If there is someone who can look after the children, we manage to prepare food quickly. For example, it is difficult to peel potatoes and look after a baby at the same time. We like making food on the fire stove, because it is fast and tasty.” Do you have cold and hot running water? Not in every house. We do not see any challenges, because we are used to this kind of life.” (Mothers, rural Batken, FGD)
- Which are your main challenges when preparing food? “If she [his wife] does not have enough time, then I will prepare it. When I do not have time, then she makes it. The only challenge is time.” (Father, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- How is your mother-in-law helping you? “She helps to finish my work at home, or she helps to look after the child.” (Mother, rural Batken, interview)
- Is it easier for you to feed the children with the mother-in-law present, or without? “They help. It is easy to live with mothers-in-law, because they always help, and also they buy certain products that children want.” Does she help, because she has more time and is more patient? “They are patient and more experienced.” Is it a challenge when you do not have time to

prepare food? “Yes, but we have a fire stove and it is easy to cook there.” (Mothers, urban Batken, FGD)

Diet Innovations

Respondents widely reported that daughters-in-law would introduce new dishes and ingredients to the household. Mostly, this concerned preparing ‘unusual’ salads, baking homemade pizza, and trying new deserts. Most households have added seasonally available greens or pumpkin for a long time, and thus do not consider that new anymore.

Generally, the fact that daughters-in-law aspire for diversity in the household diet was viewed favorably by other members. There appears to be a receptiveness for trying something new, which participants understood as a dish or ingredient that would be nutrient-rich and healthy. However, such innovations did not become established to the degree that they would be included among the households’ most-prepared dishes and rank similarly to traditional food preferences (*plov*, *shorpo* etc.). Primarily, innovations referred to adding single new items to established dishes, such as banana to a salad or pumpkin to a dumpling. Entirely new dishes remain a rare exception, but household members generally reflected an appreciation and openness for selective diet innovation.

The main source for new recipes and ideas is the Internet. Respondents only rarely mentioned any project-related information as inspiring them to increase dietary diversity. With both mothers and mothers-in-law having access to smartphones, new recipes are a common, cross-generational conversation theme.

Men presented themselves as easygoing about diet innovation and claimed to simply eat what is offered (and keep silent even if they do not personally like a dish). However, in other utterances during interviews and FGDs there was ample mention of wives preparing a second separate dish because men did not like the first (see ‘Food Preparation: How Often?’)

Questions and selected representative answers:

- Recently, did you make a dish with new ingredients? Pumpkin or something else? “Now, greens are fresh in spring. So, we use these greens and make salads and *samsy*. Adding pumpkin is not new for us.” Did you make new dish recently? “I made a salad [using a recipe] from the Internet. It was with lemon, tomatoes, cucumber. It is called *kolkhoz* salad. I really liked it and now we make it very often.” How does your husband react to new food? “He likes it and is not against.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Does your daughter-in-law cook something new that was not there before? “She made cheesecake and other desserts. She also makes new salads. We always eat pumpkin, because we add it to *samsy* and stew. She makes a salad with banana, tomato, cucumber, and pineapple.” Whose ideas was it to add these new things? “My daughter-in-law’s.” How did family members react to it? “Very good. It is new and we like it.” (Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Are you making new dishes, adding new ingredients? “We like when our daughters-in-law make new dishes. They learn it from the Internet. They make chicken legs, new salads, and bake cakes. They also make pizza. One pizza is 500 Som [to buy] and it is cheaper to make them at home.” “We make a salad with bananas and apples so that children can get vitamins. Moreover, there are vitamin supplements that we give with their food.” (Mothers-in-law, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- “Last time, she [his wife] made a new recipe and it was good. She made *samsy* that was the size of a pizza.” What did she add to it? “Meat, onion, potato, greens, and pumpkin.” What was your reaction to it? “It was very tasty and I asked her to make it again the next day.” How did your parents react? “They like meat dishes like in the old days, but they also love new ingredients.” (Father, urban Batken, interview)

- “I add new things to samsy. For example, I make samsy with pumpkin and pumpkin puree.” What was the reaction? “They were surprised, but they liked it. They used to eat pumpkin before. For new dishes, I made a spring salad with radish and greenery. I also make *manty* with pumpkin. My mother-in-law likes it, because it is soft and easy to chew.” (Mother, rural Batken, interview)
- What did you recently learn from your daughters-in-law? “I agree, the younger generation is more knowledgeable than us. They also know what food is healthy and they cook that. We can learn from our daughters-in-law. We learned new dishes from them that they got from the Internet.” (Mother-in-law, urban Batken, FGD)
- Do you also find new things on the Internet and discuss them with your daughters-in-law? “When we learn a new dish from the Internet, we make it together.” “When I see new dishes on the Internet, I send links to her [daughter-in-law’s] number.” (Mothers-in-law, urban Batken, FGD)
- Do your wives make unusual food? What is your reaction to it? “We like it. Our wives make more salads now.” “We do not say anything [to them, if they do not like it]. We eat everything. “Is there any food that you do not like? “Sometimes yes.” “Fathers-in-law do not say anything to their daughters in law.” (Fathers, rural Batken, FGD)
- Do you introduce new dishes? “Now we use more vegetables. We steam or fry them in spring, but we do not buy vegetables in winter, because they are expensive.” “Thanks to this project, we started eating more vegetables than before.” “I used a new recipe from the project's book. I used rice and it was good.” How does your family react to new dishes? Who is more open? “We discuss and mothers-in-law are more open to new dishes. Do mothers-in-law suggest new recipes? “Yes. They suggest making juices from fruit. They also buy more vegetables and bring them home.” (Mothers, rural Batken, FGD)

Deciding Which Food

When asked who decides which dishes are prepared in a household, most respondents presented this as a collective, negotiated process. Still, women were generally identified as more influential than husbands, fathers-in-law, or children. In cases of intergenerational households, mothers-in-law were often mentioned as the person to be ‘asked first’ about food preferences.

However, the fact that there is usually no great variety of dishes prepared (see ‘Food Preferences’), but only a small rotation of the same traditional dishes, diminishes the overall relevance of who decides about food preparation.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- Who decides what you cook? “Mostly, I decide and I cook. My family eats what I cook. Sometimes I ask them which food to prepare.” Does everyone also eat less popular food, like buckwheat? “Yes, they eat...” (Mother, rural Batken, interview)
- Who decides what to cook at home? “No one. I usually decide myself. But sometimes my husband tells me what to cook.” Do you usually ask their opinions on what to cook? “Yes, before I used to ask. Now, I do not ask. They usually say that I have to decide myself. That is why, now I do not ask anymore.” (Mother, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Who decides what to cook at home? “We decide together what to cook. My mother-in-law may suggest something. My children also decide. Mainly we cook *ash*.” How often do you cook *ash*? “Maybe two or three times in a week.” (Mother, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)

- [This quote represents a rare case:] “Usually, the mother-in-law decides about food. She tells what to cook. That is it, that is the law.” How about the daughter-in-law? “She cannot bring anything new as long as the mother-in-law is around...Those [daughters-in-law] who live separately, they can decide freely.” (Fathers, urban Batken, FGD)

Food Preparation

In basically all of the study households, the daughter-in-law prepares food. However, there are specific situations when other household members support her in this task. The two main situations that respondents pointed to were: 1) when the daughter-in-law has to care for multiple younger children simultaneously; 2) when the daughter-in-law is employed and might not be at home when it is time to prepare food.

The support offered to daughters-in-law follows a clear female-to-male hierarchy. If the mother-in-law is present, she usually is the first to help, either by looking after the children and/or by taking over the cooking. Husbands are reported to help only if no one else is available. This occurs more often in cases when the family does not co-reside with the husband’s parents. Although some fathers report cooking regularly for the whole family, usually men take over supportive tasks, such as peeling potatoes, cutting vegetables, or starting the fire in the oven.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- Who helps to cook food? “Our grandmother [the mother-in-law] helps peeling vegetables. My husband makes the fire, or he takes care of the child.” (Mother, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Who cooks in the family? “Daughters-in-law prepare the food.” What about mothers-in-law? “No.” “My husband cooked when I gave birth to our child. He cooked for 40 days.” (Mothers, urban Batken, FGD)

Planning

Most households tend to be spontaneous about food preparation and don’t plan more than a day or two. Other said that they plan a week ahead for fresh food items and to purchase storable items in larger quantities (especially potatoes and onions) once a month.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- Do you have a certain plan? “No, we do not have a plan. We decide what to cook every day.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Do you set a budget for each week or for a month? “Me and my mother get a monthly salary. We buy meat and fresh vegetables every week. Other products we buy once a month.” (Father, rural Batken, interview)
- How do you form the budget for food? “In Batken...we form our budget for one week. We cannot form our budget for one month.” (Father, urban Batken, FGD)

Theme 2. Dietary Diversity and Anemia

Unhealthy Food

All respondents were aware that junk food, soda, and fried or greasy dishes are detrimental to health. Many respondents claimed to actively avoid unhealthy ways of preparing food and to replace unhealthy food items (e.g., sweets with fruits or sodas with homemade *kompot*). Some parents and grandparents admitted that their children, especially older ones, consumed junk food. But they said they worked hard to limit their children’s exposure to it. Several aimed to reduce consumption of noodle- and (white) flour-based food.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- Do your children eat unhealthy food? “I think that if they eat Chinese food, it is unhealthy. We do not buy those kinds of things. For example, we do not buy [salty] crackers.” How about sugar drinks? “No, we usually make kompot. We do not buy cola or Fanta.” (Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- How do you feed your three-year-old child? “We used to give chips and other unhealthy food to children. After we heard that they are not good for them, we stopped giving it.” (Father, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- “We do not eat noodle products.” Where did you hear that noodles are not healthy? “For example, we used to eat a lot of manty, and it used to be difficult for us to digest. We slowly removed flour-based products from our diet.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Is *borsch* healthier than ash? “It is true. When making ash it is healthier to put rice on top of the meat and carrots...When we make it, we fry it all together, which is not healthy. I have heard that if you make borsch in a multi-steamer it is much healthier. Borsch is healthy, because it is not fried, but boiled and steamed.” (Mother-in-law, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- How about unhealthy food? “I ask to not give unhealthy food. I do not allow them to drink cola and Fanta. Instead, I ask them to drink apricot kompot. We can make apricot kompot instead of selling it. In summer, we can add apple to the kompot.” (Mother-in-law, rural Batken, interview)
- You mentioned that you are trying not to feed your children junk food. Is there a change in your children's health? Are they less sick? “My child has problems with his health. After eating nutritious food, he stopped having problems. We know which products have which benefits, and according to that knowledge, we feed our children. We also try to use less salt when we cook. We also used to fry our dishes, but now we are trying not to, because it is not healthy.” (Mother, urban Batken, FGD)

Food Preparation: How Often?

Many respondents prepared hot meals twice per day or two dishes simultaneously to attend to the diverging preferences and needs of household members. Often, food preferences of the parental and the grandparental generation differ, with the latter asking for ‘light food’ such as soups or non-fried meals. If younger women could decide by themselves about the diet, they tended prefer healthier and lighter dishes. More respondents in Batken than Jalal-Abad said that they cooked once per day and did not object to eating leftovers.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- “I like ash. We eat that three or four times a week. We make salads. They [other household members] make lagman, manty, but I do not eat that. When they make these kinds of food, they make a different dish for me.” (Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- “I can make two meals in case my children want to eat soup and we decide on something else. For example, sometimes we want to eat manty and kids want soup.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- “For example, I have been living with my in-laws for 21 years. If they ask me to make a different dish, I can make it.” “My father-in-law does not like liquid dishes and soups, and he cannot eat fried dishes. Every day, I make two dishes and I make them twice a day. My husband likes flour-based dishes. He would love to eat manty and oromo every day. My children like rice and buckwheat dishes with meat and vegetables.” (Mothers, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)

- Is there any time that she [his wife] makes two dishes? “Yes, it happens.” “Is it very frequent to make two dishes?” Yes, very often...If my wife prepares one dish on the ochok, then she can prepare something light for parents in the oven.” (Fathers, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- “Do you have this case that your wives prepare food for you separately? “Yes, it happens. If there is food that we do not like, then they make certain food for themselves and different food for us.” Is it very often? “In my house, very often, because I like liquid food. That is why, they make me different food. If they make liquid food, then we eat together.” (Fathers-in-law, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Does she make two dishes sometimes? “Yes, of course. Sometimes, if she cooks one dish, my husband asks to cook soup.” (Mother-in-law, urban Batken, interview)
- Do you make food once or twice a day? “She [his wife] cooks only once, because I come from work in the evening. My kids can eat leftovers when I am not home.” (Father, rural Batken, interview)

Food Preferences & Habits

There is a quite small rotation of favored dishes in Kyrgyz households. Among the five most cooked dishes are exclusively ‘traditional’ to Central Asian cuisine. The main dishes mentioned by respondents were plov/ash, manty, oromo, shorpo, and *mastava* soups. There is some regional variation, with households in Batken consuming less noodle-based dishes and more rice.

Men argued that their opposition to ‘light food’ and preference for ‘heavier’ meat-based dishes is related to their labor-intensive work, and that they cannot afford to feel hungry again after a short time. In contrast, women and members of the elder generation reflected a preference for soups and less greasy dishes, but they did not voice strong opposition to the traditional dishes. The food requirements of children mattered for households until the end of complementary feeding age. Thereafter, they ‘simply eating what everyone eats,’ while their preference for a certain dish seemed to be taken into account only in exceptional cases.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- What kind of food does your mother-in-law eat? “My mother-in-law is on a diet, so she does not eat heavy food. For example, I cannot cook ash with white rice or noodle dishes. She eats salads, mostly with beet, and she eats soup.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- What are the five main dishes that you cook at home? “Borsch, manty, ash, and *mastava*.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- What are the five most cooked dishes in your household? “Plov, shorpo, manty, oromo.” (Father-in-law, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Do you also cook borsch and other light food? “Only sometimes. We need to eat heavy food. We need to eat strong food.” “Our organisms are used to the heavy food. If we eat borsh or lentil soup, then we do not know whether we ate or not. After one hour, we are hungry again. If we eat heavy food, we are not hungry for a longer time. If we ate borsh or light food, then I would have to work on a computer [meaning have an office job].” (Fathers, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- “Basically, men work hard. In order to work hard, he needs to eat good food. Liquid food may fill your stomach, but it does not give you energy.” How about noodle dishes? “In our families, we do not make much noodles. “We mostly use rice.” (Fathers, urban Batken, FGD)

- Is borsh healthier than other food? “Borsh may have many vitamins. It might have a lot of things. For ash, you only need oil, meat, carrot, and rice.” “Here, we eat not for the vitamin, but for the fullness. If you eat borsh, after one hour, you are hungry again. If you eat ash, then it is guaranteed that you will be full for six hours.” (Fathers, rural Batken, FGD)

Anemia

More than one-third of interview respondents (14 of 38) indicated that the family’s mother/daughter-in-law has suffered from anemia. Among these, all were reported to have received treatment and medication, even if this was considered expensive. Respondents were aware of anemia and often identified it as the disease of having ‘few blood.’

Questions and selected representative answers:

- When your wife was pregnant, did she suffer from anemia? “She had few blood, but she did not have much problems. She took some medicine.” Do you think that this medicine was expensive? “It was not expensive. The medical staff here took good care of my wife.” (Father, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- When you were pregnant, did you suffer from anemia? “I had little anemia, and I took the necessary things. Then it was normal again. It was not anemia, but they said that I have few blood.” Did you take medicine? “Yes.” Was the medicine expensive? “No, not at all.” How long did you take it? “Maybe one month.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Did any of your daughters-in-law suffer from anemia? “Yes, just today we found out that they have anemia. Both now had their first injections and analysis.” Do they get any supplements or do they take anything else? “Doctors should write us a prescription. I do not know yet.” Are the injections affordable? “I just paid 600 Som for both daughters-in-law. It is expensive for me.” (Father-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Did you suffer from anemia during the pregnancy? “Yes.” Did you take any medication? “Yes.” Was it expensive or cheap? “It was a normal price.” (Mother, urban Batken, interview)
- “She suffered from anemia. She took some medication, but I cannot remember what exactly.” Was this medicine expensive? “Because salaries in Batken are low, some prices are expensive for us. For example, there is expensive medicine. You can spend 10–15 percent of your salary only for one medicine. We bought pills that she had to take, but they were affordable.” (Father, urban Batken, interview)
- Did you suffer from anemia during pregnancy? “Right now I have anemia. My blood is 94. My doctor gave me a prescription. I took it and I feel better.” Was it easy to decide, because I suppose it is not cheap? “The medicine was not expensive.” (Mother, rural Batken, interview)

Theme 3. Hygiene and Sanitation

The significance of regular handwashing with soap was obvious across all interviews and FGDs. Most respondents reported that the frequency of handwashing among household members increased during the past two years. Respondents also said that their expenses for soap and antiseptic lotion increased during the same period. Everyone considered this a necessary expense and no one depicted it as a sizeable strain to the household budget. Some participants observed fewer sanitation-related illnesses among children (e.g., stomach), which they attributed to better hygiene practices and conditions.

Respondents’ sanitary conditions varied significantly. Even among those who resided in areas that are generally identified as urban, many reported not having installations for hot running water inside their homes. Because there were respondents in rural areas with running water and a shower inside their

home, this very much seems a matter of individual financial capability and initiative or prioritization. Still, almost all respondents believe to have sufficient access to hot water, even if it needs to be fetched and heated on a stove. Respondents did not reflect a strong desire to change their sanitary conditions, even those who had no running water, shower, or other facilities in their homes.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- Where do you wash your hands? “We have hot and cold water in the house. We have good conditions.” (Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Where and how often do you and others in your household typically wash your hands? “We wash our hands outside. There is our *kumgan*. There is no sink or hot running water. We heat water in the house... We do not keep animals and we do not have a garden. We do not have enough space for that.” (Father-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Where and how often do you typically wash your hands? “After the pandemic, we started washing our hands more often. For example, we wash our hands with soap when we come inside. When our children come home from playing outside, we ask them to wash their hands.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Do you wash your hands inside the house? Do you have running water? “Yes... we have a boiler inside the house.” Do you all have running water at your house? “Most people do not have running water inside. 65 percent wash their hands outside.” (Fathers, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Where and how do you wash your hands? “We wash our hands four to five times a day with soap.” What are the challenges of maintaining hygiene? “It is important to keep hygiene for children and their good health. For example, we should wash their toys and dishes. It is important to wash that with boiled water. We should wash our children and their clothes after they finish playing. It is important to wash fruits and vegetables before giving them to a baby.” (Mothers-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- The pandemic brought changes in washing hands. How is it in your families? “Before the pandemic, we did not really tell our children to wash their hands, but we washed our hands regularly. For example, we used to wipe an apple and eat it right away. But now we are washing it well before eating it.” Did you notice that your children have less stomach issues now? “Children have less diarrhea and ascariasis.” (Mothers, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- What challenges do you have maintaining hygiene and sanitation? “Those who live in an apartment, they have no challenges. After coming from work, they take a shower. We have to bring water to the banya and make a fire... We do not have a shower, we do not have [such] a condition.” (Father, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Where do you wash? “We use *kumgan*. We put a soap next to it.” Do you have cold and hot water inside the house? “No, we do not. We are planning to install it this year.” Do you have any challenges to maintain hygiene? “No... For example, if we need hot water, we boil it and put it in the *kumgan*. Otherwise, in winter, we always have hot water boiling on the oven... After the pandemic, we used more soap and more often.” (Mother-in-law, urban Batken, interview)
- Where do you wash your hands? “In our washstand and *kumgan*. We do not have water inside the house.” Do you have challenges in washing your hands? “Because of COVID, we always wash our hands with soap. And only after that we sit at the table [and eat].” (Father-in-law, rural Batken, interview)

- Which are your main challenges for maintaining hygiene and sanitation? “We do not have problems with hot water, because there is always hot water on the stove all year around.” (Mother, urban Batken, interview)
- “We wash with cold water. In Batken, maybe 20 percent of people may have running water, but the rest not.” “We do not have an understanding of ‘warm water’.” (Fathers, urban Batken, FGD)
- What are the challenges for maintaining hygiene? “We fetch water from far away, because there is no water inside the house. Husbands bring water by car. We do not send our daughters-in-law, because they are weak.” The pandemic taught us to wash our hands more often. Did it bring changes for you in washing hands? “We did not get sick. We wash our hands more often now than before. We ask our children to wash their hands when they come from outside. We have sanitizer.” Did you notice that your children are less sick with stomach issues? “Yes, it is better now.” (Mothers-in-law, rural Batken, FGD)
- Are you spending more money on hygiene products now than before? “Yes, we buy soaps, sanitizers and masks. We are spending more money from the family budget.” (Mother-in-law, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- If you compare it to last year or two years ago, are you spending more money from the budget for hygiene products? “Soaps are getting expensive. We use more soap. We are also buying sanitizers for children.” (Mother, urban Batken, FGD)
- “Now we use soap more often.” How about antiseptic? “Yes, we are using it. It is costly.” Do you see that children's stomachache is less of a problem than before? “No difference. It is the same as before.” “In my family, maybe I noticed little bit. Illness is less... I would bring my children to the hospital more often before.” (Fathers, urban Batken, FGD)
- Do you notice that your children now get sick less than two years before, because of the handwashing? “Stomach ache is now less. It is less by almost 60 percent. We, head of villages [the respondent], often visit the hospitals. Many people now do not come to hospitals with stomach problems.” (Father, rural Batken, FGD)

Theme 4. Food Storage

All households in the study stored food to enable a nutritious diet throughout the year but especially in winter. Basically all respondents reported storing food items in fridges and freezers. Many expressed a desire to own a bigger fridge (not necessarily a freezer). There is, however, widespread skepticism about using the freezer to store food items aside from meat and bread. While some claimed to freeze fruits, particularly different sorts of berries, only few froze vegetables.

FGD participants who regularly froze vegetables were emphatic that the freshness and general quality remains after defrosting. Mostly, they stated to have read about this in the Internet or witnessed it during (migration worker) stays abroad. The one major challenge mentioned was unstable electricity provision. However, this was reported to occur rarely; and even then not for extended periods.

Food items that are commonly purchased in large quantities, especially potatoes, onions, and apples, are stored in ‘colder rooms’ or basements of the house in wooden boxes. Vegetables are either bought ‘freshly’ from local markets (*bazaar*) (weekly or more frequently), or they are pickled and conserved ‘classically’ in jars (*banky*), especially ‘winter salads’ and (Bulgarian) peppers. This clearly is a more widespread practice than freezing.

The cultural notion that frozen food, and in particular vegetables, would not be fresh anymore is very widespread. To freeze certain food items therefore collides with the conviction that food is most nutritious and tasty when it is 'freshly made'.

Many respondents reported to dry fruits, particularly apricots, which are later used to make kompot. Tomatoes are also dried by many households and later used for cooking during the winter months. Berries are widely used to make jam.

Storing and preserving food was reported as an almost exclusively female task. Men provide support in that domain only selectively and when there is a demand for of physical strength (e.g., carrying sacks of potatoes, opening jars). Decisions on storing and preserving food items blend this gendered labor-sharing (i.e., assigning most work to women) with traditional notions (e.g., storing and preserving items as 'they always have').

Questions and selected representative answers:

- Where do you typically store your food? "We have a refrigerator. We do not have a freezer." What do you usually prepare for the winter? "We prepare salads and kompot." Where do you keep them? "In the basement." Do you dry any fruits? "We dry apricots and apples, we boil kompot." Does your child drink these? "Yes, he does."
(Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Where do you store your food? "In the fridge." How about winter food? "We store apples and pumpkins in a cold room." Do you make salads for winter? "Yes, in jars." Where do you keep them? "We have a basement. We store them there."
(Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- How do you typically store food in your household? "Wooden box, fridge, and freezer are places where we store food. We keep meat, salads, and butter in the fridge. Potatoes and onions in wooden boxes." (Father-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- How do you typically store food in your household? "We keep food in the fridge. Potatoes, onions, jams, and winter preserves are in the storage room." Which are your main challenges when storing food? "We have no difficulties. But if we buy a huge number of potatoes, they might go bad in spring when it gets warm." (Father, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- How do you store food? "We have a fridge and freezer. We store there." What do you keep in freezer? "We cut meat in pieces and put it in the freezer. Whenever we need, we can take it from there. When it was cold, we were keeping it in the cold room."
(Mother-in-law, urban Batken, interview)
- What are your main challenges when storing food? "We do not have difficulties, because we have two fridges at home. Electricity is stable. For example, we might lose electricity once in one season." (Mother, rural Batken, interview)
- Where do you store the food? "In the fridge, in the basement. Every house has a fridge. There might be some families who do not have a fridge. They might dry food outside. We put the meat in the jar and put it in the water. We salt the meat." What do you keep in the freezer? "Meat and bread. Milk and yogurt are in the fridge." What challenges do you have storing food? "When it is hot outside, the fridge does not help. Electricity might be off." (Fathers, rural Batken, FGD)
- What would you change about storing the food? "I do not know. So, freezing is not good for vegetables. It is good to freeze the fruits. We do that. But it is not good to unfreeze the vegetables." (Father, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)

- “I did not like that it is not fresh when you freeze...I prefer fresh products.” (Father, rural Batken, interview)
- Do you freeze vegetables and fruits? “Yes, we freeze raspberries, peppers, greens... We keep potatoes and onions underground.” When did you start freezing? “It has been a long time since we started. We used to pickle vegetables in the past.” Did you get any books about freezing fruit and vegetables? “I have read it in the newspaper. We do not have books about freezing.” (Mothers, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Where did you learn about freezing vegetables? “From the Internet, but also from migrants.” Have you seen any books about freezing vegetables? “No, we did not see such.” (Fathers, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- “Vegetables are good to freeze for winter. If we freeze it, it will be fresh and healthy. We have heard about it. But we have not frozen yet. We can freeze raspberries and strawberries in the freezer. But if we freeze potatoes, I think it will not work.” “You should not freeze potatoes.” “For example, [you can freeze] tomatoes, Bulgarian pepper.” “The taste may not be good then.” “The taste will be the same. Nothing will happen.” (Fathers, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- You mentioned that you freeze fruits and vegetables. When did you start doing that? “It has been five-six years since we have been freezing berries mixed with sugar. We learned it from each other and from other sources.” Do you freeze vegetables? “I freeze greens in containers, peppers, eggplants. We also dry eggplants, tomatoes. By the way, we tried to freeze corn. Then we boiled it. We also added it to shorpo. It is tasty and fresh!” (Mothers-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- What do you freeze? “When vegetables are cheaper, my wife freezes almost everything. We always have peppers, celery, dill, and other products in the freezer. We also freeze fresh jam for winter.” Who had this idea to freeze vegetables and other products? “Five years ago, this method was not popular in Batken. In 2016, after I graduated from university, I went abroad to work for two years. I worked as a barista at a bar. When I needed certain products, I would go to the storage room where fruits and vegetables were frozen. I called my parents and told them about it. It has been three years since we are freezing big amounts of vegetables.” (Father, urban Batken, interview)
- Do you consider frozen vegetables not to be fresh anymore? “I think that we should not eat frozen vegetables. There are no calories and quality in them.” “No, it is still good. The freezer keeps the vegetables on one temperature. We usually keep the bread there. But we do not keep it for a long time.” (Fathers, urban Batken, FGD)
- It is good to freeze fruit and vegetables for winter? “It will not be fresh. It also has two sides. First, it is good to use in winter. Second, it is not fresh. We do not need to freeze, because we get fresh products in the market.” (Mother-in-law, urban Batken, FGD)
- Was it difficult to convince other members of the family that frozen food is still fresh food? “When we freeze it, it is not as fresh. When we make kompot from frozen fruit it tastes different. Our families are fine with freezing. They do not say anything when we cook with frozen vegetables.” If you had a bigger freezer, what would you put in it? “We would freeze raspberries, strawberries, grapes, peppers, and other vegetables. Electricity will not be a problem. In winter, we can take food from the freezer and keep it outside. In spring we do not have problems, because we will have eaten most products by that time. The electricity goes off when it is windy.” (Mothers, rural Batken, FGD)

Theme 5. Household Budgeting

Nature of the Budget

Most respondents stated that food expenses make more than 50 percent of their total monthly household budget. Many households reported this number to be even higher, with some indicating it would reach as high as 80 percent. This is a trend that has markedly increased since 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, and that has gained even further momentum due to the Ukraine crisis. In the situation of rapidly increasing food prices, people buy basic items first to maintain the small rotation of ‘traditional’ (Kyrgyz) dishes, especially flour, cooking oil, meat, potatoes. Other food items are purchased if the budget allows, which also means that nutrient content tends to be not the primary concern in that decision-making.

Aside from inflation and price hikes for food items, respondents did not relate such elevated food expenses to the fact that many households are preparing two dishes at the same time, for men or grandparents and for women and kids, and/or prepare two warm meals per day. Preparing multiple meals was reported to be more often the case in Jalal-Abad and less in Batken. There is thus no widespread understanding that the effort of coordinating and agreeing on a ‘family meal,’ which all members consume jointly on a day, could reduce household expenses.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- What percentage of your budget do you spend for food? “We have a big family. I would say 80 percent of the budget we spend for food.” (Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- What percentage of your budget do you spend for food? “In general, we spend 40,000 Som per month. 70–80 percent we spend for food.” Did it change during the past two years? “It changed recently, because everything is expensive now.” Two years ago, what percentage was spent for food? “It was around 60–70 percent. Now, it is around 80 percent.” (Fathers-in-law, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- How much do you spend on food? “70–80 percent, but with diapers and napkins it will be 90 percent.” Was it different two years ago? “Yes, but salaries were also lower. Moreover, we now have a greater variety of products available. Maybe that’s why we are spending more money on food.” (Mothers, rural Batken, FGD)

Setting the Budget

All respondents said they had power in household budget decisions, but there was no generalizable pattern as to who decides primarily. In some households, this role is assigned to the father-in-law; in others it is the father- and mother-in-law who set and keep the budget; and in still others, the father himself or with the mother, while the grandparental generation has a marginal role.

Regardless of who keeps and allocates the money, mothers tend to ask that certain items be considered for purchase, thereby co-setting and influencing the budget. Budget-setting thus appears to be a negotiated process in which women of different ages have leverage, particularly in the nutrition domain. In practice, mothers create lists with food items to be brought, while usually men, sometimes mothers-in-law, and rarely daughters-in-law who purchase and bring the items home. This pattern was more distinctly expressed in Batken than in Jalal-Abad.

Ability to set the budget shifted to women (first older, then younger) when men were not in the household permanently (i.e., migration, divorce, or death). Furthermore, working women who contribute their income to the household budget, of whom there were only few in the study’s sample, seem to have more decision-making power than those who work in the home only.

Questions and selected representative answers:

- How is the budget formed in your family? “Usually, we decide together.” Who keeps the budget? “The father-in-law keeps it.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- “Usually, we do not have that much to decide. I tell him [her husband] necessary things and he buys them.” Does he bring all necessary things? “Sometimes he does not bring, if the money is not enough.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Who makes decision on what to spend? “If it is big things, like a TV, then we decide together...If small things, my mom and my wife decide.” (Father, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Who sets the budget in the family? “My father.” Does your wife work? “No, she does not. My father sets the budget. He adds my salary and his pension.” Does your wife participate in decision making? “Me and my father agree...Later I can talk to my wife about it.” (Father, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Who sets the budget? “Me and my wife, because my father is not involved.” (Father, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Does your father set the budget? “My mother sets the budget and she consults with my wife” So your father is deciding what they will cook and his mother is mainly deciding how they are arranging the budget? “My mother is an accountant, that’s why she is in charge of the budget.” (Father, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- How do you set the budget? “We make a list of products and our husbands buy them when they get their salaries.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- “We have misunderstandings with our husbands sometimes when we set the budget. We also have to think about our children’s needs, expenses for traditional celebrations, and other things.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Who decides about the budget for food at home? “Men decide.” “All family members say their opinions. The final decision is made by men. We discuss.” “Men keep it. Women tell what to bring.” Men form the budget, women implement it? “We agree with this. Men find the money, form the budget, and women implement it.” How about others [FGD participants]? “We need to discuss with our family members.” Does it happen that women decide about the family budget? “Yes, it happens.” “But no one talks about it [laughing].” (Fathers, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- “My husband sets the budget. When I was working, I would also set the budget. Right now, I am on maternity leave and I have to ask for money from my husband.” (Mother, urban Batken, interview)
- How do you typically set the budget in your family, specifically the part for food? “My mother-in-law sets the budget for the food part.”(Mother, rural Batken, interview)
- Who decides about money at home? “The money, we do not hold it on our hands, it immediately slips away. If we need it, we find it somehow. We decide together.” Does your daughter-in-law say what to buy, too? “She is our consultant. She tells what to bring and we buy it.” (Mother-in-law, urban Batken, interview)

- Who forms the budget at home? “My husband and I do it together. We work together.” Who keeps the money? “I keep it and my daughter-in-law keeps it.” How about your son? “They keep their money. I do not ask for their money.” (Mother-in-law, rural Batken, interview)
- Who keeps the budget? “My husband.” Who decides what to buy? “He decides. I also tell what to buy.” How about your daughter-in-law? “She does not participate.” (Mother-in-law, urban Batken, interview)
- A man sets the budget and a woman executes it? “That is true. Men cannot execute the budget, because they do not know what we need for the house, especially the food part.” (Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Who sets the budget in the family? “The father-in-law is the head of the family, so he sets the budget. If there is no father-in-law, then the mother-in-law does it. Children do not set the budget. The daughter-in-law also does not set the budget in Kyrgyz culture.” Who keeps the money in the family? “I do it in my family, but my children work and keep their own money with them.” “My husband works. We take some money from his salary and give it to my mother-in-law. The rest we keep.” (Mothers, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Who is the bank in the house? “It is in the middle, and my wife keeps it.” My parents keep it.” “I keep it myself.” (Fathers, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Who keeps the budget at home? “Of course men. Men keep it.” “Since Roza Otunbaeva became [the first and only female] president, now women keep the budget at home.” Do your daughters-in-law talk about the budget with you? “No, they do not talk to us about the budget.” (Fathers-in-law, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- Do your husbands bring their salary to you or to your mothers-in-law? “We both work. My husband does not give his salary to anyone. When I ask for money, he gives me. We both get products, because when he goes by himself, he does not choose good-quality products. I spend my salary on my children’s education.” Who keeps the money in your family? “Women do.” (Mothers, urban Batken, FGD)
- A man sets the budget and a woman executes it? “Our husbands work, and women say what products have to be bought...When a man has money, he can spend all of it at once. Women try to use money reasonably.” (Mother-in-law, urban Batken, FGD)
- A man sets the budget and a woman executes it? “That is true. If they agree on it, a woman can execute the budget.” “Women make a list of everything.” “I do everything in my family.” “My husband works and I spend.” Does the husband bring all the items from the list [women prepare]? “He demands to make it shorter or tells us that we will buy it later.” (Mothers, rural Batken, FGD)
- Who gets the products? “My commander [his wife] gets the products. Usually, my wife and I go, but my son and my daughter-in-law do not go. My wife knows the list of products to get and we buy them. We buy bananas and apples for the children.” (Father-in-law, rural Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Who gets the products? “It is rare when men get the products in Kyrgyz culture. Men bring money and women get the products.” When they go, do you make a list of products? Do they bring them all? “Yes, they bring.” “If they do not bring all the items from the list, we will send them again the next day.” (Mothers, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)

Theme 6. SBC Messaging

Respondents were asked whether they were aware of project-related content, whether they discuss such contents with others, and whether this has led them to change aspects of their nutrition behavior.

Respondents indicated that project message content is well-spread, particularly among women, but also men and across generations. Generally, men tended to be less aware of the project's SBC messages than women. The local medical points were often mentioned as important sources of information, even if not all information in circulation had a clear link to the project. The project's TV and Internet-based clips are known by many respondents. But there were also alternative sources from which respondents gained similar knowledge: social media and the Internet more generally, and people's experience from living elsewhere (e.g., Russia, Qatar).

Project-related messages appear to be discussed within most families: between spouses and between daughters- and mothers-in-law. The ability to access the Internet and browse food-related content online provided daughters- and mothers-in-law with a common topic of discussion. Both appreciated this new opportunity for social exchange.

Whether project-related messages actually led to changes in behavior, or if there were other causes of nutritional adjustments, remains unclear. When compared to the situation some years ago, dietary diversity appears to be increasing, particularly in terms of adding healthy ingredients (e.g., salads, pumpkin). However, the small rotation of traditional main dishes has remained unchanged, primarily because men claim to need heavy food to perform their labor-intensive workload. Furthermore, respondents clearly indicated taking active measures against overconsumption of junk food and monitoring the use of unhealthy ingredients (sugar, salt).

Awareness: Questions and selected representative answers:

- Have you heard about any messages of this USAID project? “They invite pregnant women [to come to the medical points]...Mostly my daughter-in-law comes here, but not me.” (Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- What do you remember about healthy food, hygiene, or any other project information? “I have heard that sparkling water and *Rolton* (instant noodles) are bad for health.” Where do you get this information, from TV, social media, or doctors? “From TV, but now through my [smart] phone.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Have you heard any project messages? “I received some information from *FAP*. The medical personnel explain what I should give to my children. I also saw some videos from WhatsApp. They were about how to eat healthy food. I forgot what exactly.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- How have you become aware of this project? “When we come to the local clinic, doctors and nurses tell us about healthy food. Right now my daughters-in-law are reading books about healthy food downstairs.” (Father-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Of which project messages are you aware? “We all know about this project. It is about healthy eating, not only for kids but also for parents.” Why is this information important? “First of all, it is important to maintain good health...for us and our children. If the parent is healthy, the baby is healthy...We should avoid sweets, chemicals, soda, and other junk food. It is important to make homemade *kompot*, jams, and preserve food for winter. If you do not have enough money in winter, then use what you preserve to feed your children. For example, we cannot provide our children with fresh apples and bananas every day. It is good that we grow carrots, apples, potatoes, and other vegetables in our country.” (Mothers, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)

- Have you heard or seen any USAID-project related messages? “We watch the *Balastan* [TV] channel, and they show messages about healthy food, breastfeeding, and hygiene.” Did you get any messages on WhatsApp? “No.” (Mother, urban Batken, interview)
- Of which messages are you aware? “This project brought us success and new knowledge. For example, we learned that we should give additional food to our babies when they are six months old. We learned that we should give three meals and two snacks per day. We start with one or two spoons when first feeding a child. Not only young mothers are learning, but also grandmothers and fathers.” (Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, FGD)
- This project has messages about healthy food and hygiene, and these are distributed through various channels. “We did not hear about it. We did not pay attention to healthy food at all.” Where do you get these messages? Have you seen messages on TV? “Only some of them.” “Sometimes we see advertisements but not very often.” (Fathers, urban Batken, FGD)
- Of which messages are you aware? “We have a group on WhatsApp where we get information. We also watch [messages] on TV and we get it from activists.” (Mother, rural Batken, FGD)
- Did you receive any books or brochures about freezing? “No, we did not.” When did you start freezing? “It has been five years. We heard about it from USAID and the Internet.” “I learned it when I was in Russia. They freeze many products. I bought a freezer when I came.” (Mothers, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)

Discussion: Questions and selected representative answers:

- Does your daughter-in-law tell you and discuss with you [about project messages]? “Yes, she tells me about healthy feeding. And she follows these rules. I agree with healthy feeding.” (Mother-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Did you discuss these messages with other people? “Yes, I do. I talk to people in my village. When we are guests somewhere, we exchange information.” Did you talk to your husband [about project messages]? Was it interesting for him? “I did not ask him, if it was interesting.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Have you discussed messages within your household? “Yes, we have. These days, the younger generation of women are more knowledgeable and understanding than us when we were young.” (Mother, rural Jalal-Abad, FGD)

Changes: Questions and selected representative answers:

- Do you think that something has changed because of these messages? “First, I learned how to freeze vegetables from that book. Later on, I learned that I should not give tea to children. The rest, I knew myself.” What do you give to your child instead of tea? “I give kompot. I also give boiled water. I also drink boiled water.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Did your knowledge change anything at home? “Yes, mainly I now add beans and other healthy stuff to dishes. I try to add carrots and other vegetables. I try to give fruits, like apple.” (Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- Do your grandchildren eat fast food? “I try to give them bananas, pomegranates, and apples. They cry that they want potato chips, but I do not buy them. I do not want them to get food poisoning.” (Father-in-law, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)
- In which ways have you changed your behavior since hearing these messages? “I learned a new recipe and I added broccoli with cheese. It has been a month since I started making it. My

children like it. I also started using eggplant and cauliflower. I did not learn about hygiene from this project because we already had this knowledge.'

(Mother, urban Jalal-Abad, interview)

- You have older children and young children. Do you feed your younger children differently than you used to feed your older children before? "When we had older children, we did not have projects like this. We used to make *bulamyk*, but now we are making porridge. We received new information about feeding. There is a group of women on WhatsApp from which we get useful information about the project. For example, we need to breastfeed until a baby is six months old and then start giving additional food. Before we used to give water and *bulamyk* earlier." "We stopped giving water to our babies, because we learned that breastmilk already has all the vitamins and benefits. We learned about healthy eating." (Mothers, rural Batken, FGD)

Discussion and Recommendations

Negotiating the Gender Divide

When taking gender as a cross-cutting category, all themes in this study, except for the one on household budgeting, were depicted by respondents as belonging to the ‘female domain’. Women, and particularly daughters-in-law, are responsible for feeding children and other household members; establishing hygienic conditions; and storing food at home. Beyond all practical aspects, they are also primarily responsible for acquiring and disseminating knowledge in these areas.

Men are actively involved only in the household budgeting specifically allocating and keeping monetary resources. Otherwise, most men make substantial contributions in exceptional situations only. Their input is sporadic and includes minimal supportive tasks. Overall, men act, view themselves, and are perceived as temporary substitutes for their wives, but not as equally contributing partners in the household domain.

This gendered labor division was more balanced only in those few cases when daughters-in-law worked and contributed income. But then the mother first approached the mother-in-law for support, and secondly fathers or fathers-in-law.

However, men do get involved in matters of nutrition and the household, and respondents did not mention cultural or religious arguments to legitimize their passiveness in these domains (e.g., ‘Kyrgyz culture says that men should not interfere in household work’). Furthermore, and despite some men mentioning their work-related absence from home, none openly claimed to ‘not have enough time to help.’

This should be considered a potential entry-point for interventions directed at changing nutrition behaviors. At the least, it indicates that there seem to be no obstacles inspired by cultural, religious, or other ideological notions that are too sensitive or prone to cause harm when designing project activities in the gender-nutrition nexus.

In general, the study documents ways in which Kyrgyz household labor division is gendered for nutrition-related behaviors. However, the evidence assembled here also shows that households make pragmatic adjustments to prevailing notions of gender roles, at least temporarily, in response to specific situations. Participation, labor contribution, and decision-making in the household and nutrition domain is thus subject to negotiation between men and women and across generations. This must be considered another positive condition for targeted project interventions to be effective and favorably received.

One of USAID Advancing Nutrition’s major objectives is to increase communication between wives and husbands about nutrition behaviors and to support their joint decision-making on this topic. The findings of this study show that joint decision-making is difficult to document and assess in some settings, such as Kyrgyzstan, where the gender divide exclusively assigns the nutrition and food domain to women.

If joint decision-making is understood to be a decision made by individuals of different gender but with equal amounts input, then there is not much joint decision-making about nutrition in Kyrgyzstan. Daughters-in-law usually have the least influence in a household. Even if their influence increases with age, and in cases when they live alone with their husband instead of in an extended household, it is never equal to that of men or (female) in-laws.

If, however, one does not understand ‘joint’ to be ‘equal,’ then this study documented joint decision-making as a social process that is not clearly or always dominated by one social group (e.g., men); is to some extent open-ended; and is negotiated between different (gender) interests to arrive at some form of compromise. These compromises still favor male preferences and thus reflect the continuing dominance of the patriarchal system. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that men can decide not to

contribute to the daily operation of the household-nutrition domain without significant social consequences. Such withdrawal limits wives' ability to communicate household and nutrition issues with their husbands. However, the fact that men will help in circumstances of need indicates that the Kyrgyz patriarchal system allows for pragmatic, exceptional adjustments.

Further evidence of such pragmatic adjustability is the fact that women's food preparation preferences are considered, which enables them to introduce new, healthier dishes and ingredients to the household's diet. At the same time, daughters-in-law voices are not dominant, which is reflected in the fact that these healthier dishes are prepared rarely, and that daughters-in-law prepare two meals a day to accommodate the preferences of other household members (men or parents-in-law).

The study demonstrates a need to develop a decision-making perspective that accounts for its actual complexity. Decision-making on matters of nutrition in Kyrgyz households could be distinguished into the co-dependent components of:

- 1) joint preference communication, with daughters-in-law being less outspoken and influential for cultural reasons; 2) executing tasks in the household-nutrition domain, which is handled autonomously by daughters-in-law; and 3) joint allocation of means, with daughters-in-law proposing food items and men or elder household members purchasing them.

Consideration of these aspects allows us to grasp household decision-making as a gendered, negotiated practice. Daughters-in-law are responsible for being knowledgeable about the household-nutrition domain and assuring that it runs smoothly. Beyond everyday execution, and whenever planning and resource allocation are concerned, daughters-in-law do not make decisions autonomously, but in communication with the household's men and older women. Daughters-in-law participate in this process from a position of (culturally) limited power. At the same time, this does not mean that younger women are simply told what to do and expected to comply, they can also make suggestions and convince others of their viewpoints.

Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices, & the Gender-Nutrition Nexus

When taking a cross-cutting view, it is useful to examine the themes of this study related to knowledge, attitudes, and practices.

Basic knowledge on feeding, dietary diversity, hygiene and sanitation, and food storage was widespread among all groups of respondents. This seems an improvement from the situation depicted in the baseline study that was conducted at the end of 2020 (despite the two studies' different design and purpose).

This study could not document any fundamental deficits in knowledge or a deliberate ignorance of a specific theme. Women, and particularly daughters-in-law, were clearly more knowledgeable than husbands or fathers-in-law. The fact that they shared new knowledge with other household members appeared to be appreciated. (Household budgeting and SBC messaging are not discussed here because they are less knowledge-based and more practice-oriented.)

Potentials for improvement became recognizable for in-depth knowledge about specific aspects of a theme. For example, there is a widespread misconception that frozen vegetables would lose their nutritious quality, despite that other food items, such as berries, are commonly stored in the freezer.

The study documented a general receptiveness for innovation in gender and nutrition. This did not go so far that respondents revealed readiness for a gender role-reversal or fundamental changes to the established labor division. For example, there was no indication that other household members would expand their food preparation contribution to increase daughters-in-law availability for other chores (unless for income generation). Also, no respondent reflected on the possibility of giving daughters-in-law a more decisive and less consultative role in household budget setting.

In other areas, however, respondents across all groups clearly articulated interested in ‘trying out new things’ and being open to change. For example, other household members appreciated daughters-in-law effort to obtain and convey knowledge about feeding and nutrition from outside sources. Furthermore, many respondents who so far had refrained from freezing a broader range of food items, particularly vegetables, responded positively to the different experiences of other FGD participants.

The everyday *modus operandi* of the gender-nutrition nexus can be characterized as following a ‘pragmatic conservatism.’ The notion of a pragmatic conservatism highlights that there is a tension and ambivalence between a dominant conservatism, understood as a traditional ideology, and a simultaneous potential for pragmatic, temporary and limited adjustments in the practical domain.

The study documented instances of such pragmatic conservatism across different themes when the acquired knowledge and open attitude of respondents translated into adjustments that selectively responded to collective needs of the household. For example, the study showed that mothers-in-law and fathers do, even if partially and temporarily, substitute for daughters-in-law and take over household and nutrition tasks whenever the latter are occupied with cooking or caring for other children, or in the rare cases when daughters-in-law earn an income. Furthermore, daughters-in-law are able to introduce new ingredients and dishes (which are usually healthy and more nutritious) even if they deviate from the traditional Kyrgyz diet, as long as they are tasty and affordable.

For many key themes, however, the degree or extent of implemented change is limited and does not match the acquired knowledge or the proclaimed open attitude. For example, and despite minor adjustments to add new ingredients or prepare a new dish, there has been no significant change observable in the small rotation of Kyrgyz traditional dishes, which often are fried and have too much fat and carbohydrates. Furthermore, there is a tendency to prepare multiple daily meals to accommodate divergent preferences, despite the significant strain that rising food prices have put on household budgets in recent years.

When drawing a line from knowledge to attitude to practice, respondents indicated significant potential to introduce change in the gender-nutrition nexus. But this potential reveals itself as comparatively under-exploited when contrasted with everyday practices that are conservative and only selectively adjusted. Therefore, it seems advisable that future interventions develop a more distinct focus on the translation of knowledge and attitudes into ‘change through practice’ (with the subsequent objective that these new behaviors will be assigned desirable socio-cultural values).

Recommendations

Feeding & Dietary Diversity

- Expand opportunities for women to be supported by other family members in the domain of feeding children and the family beyond times of exceptional need or if they work outside the home. Drawing on the fact that the handling of household and nutrition matters can selectively and temporarily diverge from the predominating gendered model to be pragmatically adjusted, identify (culturally) legitimate reasons to decrease the time poverty that many daughters-in-law face, and mobilize men to actively contribute, instead of only reactively support. If men are involved in agriculture or seasonal labor migration, there are clearly defined times of the year during which they can do this.
- Compose and introduce tangible role models, (e.g., ‘the modern mother-in-law’ or ‘the responsible father’), to convey SBC messages by advocating to ease daughter-in-law’s multiple, time-intensive burdens and associate such behavior with positive socio-cultural values (e.g., as a contribution to the future of the family, kinship group, or nation).
- Be aware that more supportive husbands or mothers-in-law could be considered as encroaching upon the daughter-in-law’s domain of household nutrition, to which daughters-in-law might

object, especially if they work exclusively in the home, as most do. The regions where this study was conducted, Batken in particular, suffer from an acute shortage of income opportunities, which could mean that the identity of daughters-in-law is strongly and exclusively by their performance in the household and children's upbringing. Consider that this identity could be challenged in a negative way, if men were not only breadwinners but also took over an equal part in the household operation.

- Use daughter-in-laws' existing initiative and agency to introduce new, healthy ingredients and dishes to achieve dietary change. In addition, consider measures to increase the exchange between daughters- and mothers-in-law about new healthy recipes (which they discuss based on their joint access to the Internet). Drawing on such emergent and positive exchanges could present a new entry-point for project intervention (as it goes against the dominant, hierarchical view of daughters-in-law being ruled and subjugated by mothers-in-law). Specifically, facilitating the formation of female, cross-generational alliances within households could increase opportunities to diversify household diets, especially because mothers-in-law are influential in deciding which dishes are prepared. However, such an approach must avoid creating intra-household social tensions by ostracizing husbands and fathers-in-law.
- The aforementioned recommendation to embrace 'change through practice' has potential to improve intra-household communication. Expanding on the example of daughters- and mothers-in-law recipe sharing, efforts could be made to give households the opportunity to do something together, such as participating in a cooking event with more nutritious food items (see below). Such events promises to be more effective they have a larger-scale audience, such as a village, because the prospect of social prestige increases incentives, especially for men, to participate. This recommendation aims to avail the interest that many households in this study expressed for 'new dishes' and blend it with entertaining fora for tangible learning.

Food Storage

- Since basically all respondents own at least a fridge with a freezer unit, increase awareness that freezing vegetables is a time-efficient and cost-saving method of preservation. In addition, increase understanding that the quality of frozen vegetables complies with the prevalent cultural value of eating 'fresh' food.
- Develop hands-on approaches for people to experience the benefit of using frozen food items. This could be in the form of village-based or inter-regional cooking competitions, or a traveling food truck that offers dishes featuring defrosted food items and promotes dietary diversity.
- As indicated above, such cooking competitions and similarly entertaining public events could attract and connect men to nutrition. At the same time, participatory events are an alternative to social media for disseminating knowledge. 'Learning by doing' should be considered a way to increase interest in nutrition among men, which could lead to more empathy for the nutritional viewpoints of daughters-in-law and thereby increase their input into household nutrition decisions.
- Explore ways to increase mens' involvement in food storage and preservation. For example, note that the usual time for traditional food preservation coincides with when men working in agriculture or as seasonal labor migrants tend to have more free time at home.

Planning & Budgeting

- With 50–80 percent of monthly household budgets assigned to food consumption, promote ways for households to better plan and strategically approach their food purchase decisions. This should include exploring adjustments to established consumption patterns, in particular the

widespread practice of preparing multiple meals per day. Efforts could be made to expand the notion of a family meal, which all members consume on a particular day, even if this demands coordination, compromise, and leftover consumption.

- Drawing on the negotiated, collective handling of household budgets, identify measures to give daughters- and mothers-in-law significant joint budget-setting power. As with dietary diversity, an alliance between daughters- and mothers-in-law, who mostly define which food items will be purchased from the bottom up, promises a more cost-efficient purchasing practice, especially if combined with the practice of family meals.

Annexes

Annex 1. Instruments

The guidelines used for data collection during FGDs and interviews can be accessed on this shared Google Drive folder:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FTubK72JAg3HklY0c4uoZsgACyQ6ChEN?usp=sharing>

Annex 2. FGD and Interview Files

The audio and transcript files for all FGDs and interviews conducted for this study, as well as the visualizations created during FGDs, can be accessed on this shared Google Drive folder:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FTubK72JAg3HklY0c4uoZsgACyQ6ChEN?usp=sharing>

Annex 3. Codebook

The codebook can be accessed on this shared Google Drive folder:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FTubK72JAg3HklY0c4uoZsgACyQ6ChEN?usp=sharing>

Annex 4. Request for Proposal

The request for proposal document pertaining to this study, which includes its original timetable, can be accessed on this shared Google Drive folder:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FTubK72JAg3HklY0c4uoZsgACyQ6ChEN?usp=sharing>



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