Sex-Based Inequalities in Child Nutrition in Zambia

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Introduction

The prevalence of stunting in male children under five (CU5) in Zambia is 42%, while female stunting is 38%. This difference is magnified in Zambia’s Eastern Province, where the Feed the Future (FTF) Zambia Mawa Project works to improve household nutrition among 12,500 households in Chipata and Lundazi districts. According to the FTF 2013 baseline survey, 51.2% of male CU5 are stunted, compared to 41.9% of female CU5 in the Eastern Province. Although these inequalities are observed across Africa, the underlying causes are not well understood. This is partially due to a lack of operations research on the effectiveness of interventions targeting sex-based differences in child nutrition.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to understand whether community-led complementary feeding and learning sessions (CCFLS), a CRS approach to prevent malnutrition among children under two (CU2) implemented under Mawa, is an effective method for addressing sex-based differences in stunting among children aged 6-23 months.

Objectives

1. Identify the cultural determinants of sex-based differences in stunting.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of CCFLS to reduce sex-based differences in stunting among children 6-23 months.
3. Identify ways for CCFLS to more effectively address the determinants of sex-based differences in stunting.

Methods

Over one year, June 2014 through June 2015, Mawa conducted a quantitative baseline assessment and final evaluation of child growth and nutrition. Mawa collected length, weight, and mid-upper arm circumferenece measurements from a sample of 2,491 CU2 and information on child preferences and feeding and care practices from a sub-sample of 275 caretakers. Participants were identified among beneficiary households of Mawa’s sub-sample of 275 caretakers. Participants were observed that girl children were more likely than boys to have no gender preference. Among the remaining 270 caretakers, more showed a preference for girl children (51.3%) compared to boys (22.6%). Child feeding and care practice results, measured by breastfeeding duration, vaccination rates and provision of oral hydration therapy to children with diarrhea, do not support preferential treatment for girl children over boys.

The in-depth qualitative research revealed a widespread awareness that girl children grow more quickly than boys, which was often linked to the idea that girls have a larger appetite than boys and require more food to facilitate their rapid growth. The belief that boys are “difficult” to feed was widespread amongst both male and female caretakers. Boys were often considered to be both selective in their food choices, as well as unable to eat enough to satisfy their hunger. Both male and female caretakers observed that girl children were more likely than boys to be found close to their mothers. Due to this proximity, caretakers believed girls were more frequently offered food. Participants suggested that this close-ness assuaged girl children’s appetite and reduced their propensity towards selectiveness as they were frequently exposed to a variety of foods. The preliminary observational data did not reveal any differences in feeding based on a child’s sex.

Results

Baseline survey results confirm higher stunting rates among male CU5 (44.0%), compared to female CU5 (33.9%) in Mawa project communities. Initial inquiries into caretaker preferences for boy versus girl children demonstrate that almost half (46.2%) either prefer an equal number of boys and girls or have no gender preference. Among the remaining caretakers, more showed a preference for girl children (51.3%) compared to boys (22.6%). Child feeding and care practice results, measured by breastfeeding duration, vaccination rates and provision of oral hydration therapy to children with diarrhea, do not support preferential treatment for girl children over boys.

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Conclusions

Sex-based inequalities in nutrition persist among CU5 in Mawa project communities. While preliminary results do not lead to conclusions about the effectiveness of CCFLS in reducing sex-based differences in stunting, quantitative analysis is ongoing. The qualitative research identified strong perceptions about sex-based differences in child growth and behavior among mothers, fathers, and grandparents that have direct implications for child care and feeding. Primary differences focused on the natural appetites of boys and girls, their respective risk of illness and their different growth rates. Further studies should include a comprehensive set of observations to determine actual childcare and feeding practices.

Implications for Programming

Since most of the socio-cultural determinants of behavior are rooted in perception, helping to shift perception is critical for sustainable behavior change. Based on these results, Mawa adapted CCFLS to include discussions around these perceptions and to more effectively include household influencers in sessions.

Relevancy for East Africa

CRS Zambia will use these research results to inform how CRS led nutrition projects in East Africa address culturally determined, sex-based differences in child feeding practices through CCFLS. By working through household influencing groups to course-correct perceptions of girls’ and boys’ feeding needs during the first two years of life, Mawa and similar projects can foster long-term improvements in child nutrition.

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References


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