

# Food Myths and Nutritional Fulfillment: The Social Construction of Women in Overcoming Stunting

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**ABSTRACT:** Tackling stunting is a major challenge in many communities, including in Durian Depun Village. This research titled "Food Myths and Nutrition fulfillment: The Socio-Cultural Construction of Women in Overcoming Stunting" aims to examine how social construction and local myths influence women's decisions in providing nutritious food, as well as its impact on stunting prevention efforts. The research used a qualitative research method with a case study approach. The results showed that long-term malnutrition is one of the main causes of stunting in this area. Efforts to fulfill the nutrition of stunted children are carried out through counseling and providing nutritious food assistance such as eggs, SGM milk, and nuggets, which are managed by the kelurahan stunting task force with funds of around 25 million per year. However, there is a unique phenomenon in the field where some families are reluctant to accept assistance and mentoring, arguing that they can afford nutritious food and rejecting the notion that their children are stunted. Some mothers believe that stunting is hereditary and not the result of malnutrition. The study also found that while basic knowledge of good nutrition was present among women, daily practices were often inconsistent with this knowledge. The main factors affecting nutritional fulfillment were adjustments to family income, local knowledge about the virtues of rice, and myths about certain foods such as eggs and sea fish. The availability of nutritious food in local markets is also limited, which impacts on daily food choices. These limitations lead to the consumption of unbalanced foods, such as instant noodles and snacks favored by children, and neglect the need for protein and other essential nutrients. The accumulation of the above factors eventually constructs a minimalist diet in the family.

**KEYWORDS:** Stunting, Food Myths, Nutrition Fulfillment, Social Construction of Women.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia faces a major challenge in tackling stunting, which is one of its top public health priorities (Ardiyansyah, M, 2023). Stunting, or dwarfism, is a condition in which children experience stunted physical growth and lower height than their age standard due to chronic malnutrition. Based on the 2022 Indonesian Nutrition Status Survey (SSGI), the prevalence of stunting in Indonesia showed a decrease from 24.4% in 2021 to 21.6% in 2022 (BKPK News, 2023). Despite the decrease, the stunting rate is still far from the national target of 14% by 2024 (Rahayu et al., 2020).

Stunting not only affects children's physical growth but can also have a serious impact on their cognitive abilities, which in turn can affect the quality of future generations (Daracantika et al., 2021). Research shows that stunted children are at high risk of learning difficulties and have lower productivity potential in the future (Handayani, 2023). This has a negative impact on economic development and the overall well-being of society.

Furthermore, stunted children may have lower productivity when entering the workforce. This malnutrition that affects cognitive and physical development often leads to lower educational outcomes, which in turn can lead to lower skills and employability (Yadika et al., 2019). Research shows that individuals who are stunted in childhood tend to have lower incomes and limited employment opportunities compared to their peers who are not (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2014).

The impact of stunting is certainly not only felt by affected individuals but also affects economic development and the welfare of society as a whole (Putri et al., 2023). Generations with limitations in intellectual capacity and productivity can affect economic growth, hinder innovation, and reduce the country's competitiveness in the global arena (Khotimah, 2022). In addition, the inability to reach their full potential can exacerbate social and economic disparities, creating a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break (Rully Angraeni Safitri et al., 2023). Therefore, tackling stunting is not only an individual health issue but also an important

investment in broader economic development and social welfare. Effective efforts to reduce stunting can provide long-term benefits, improve quality of life, and strengthen the socio-economic foundations of society.

As part of the global effort to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Indonesia set an ambitious target to reduce stunting prevalence by 40% by 2025. (The National Strategy for the Acceleration of Stunting Prevention (STRANAS) 2018-2024 has been launched in response to this challenge, focusing on evidence-based interventions to reduce stunting rates (Damanik1 et al., 2021). However, achieving this target still faces many obstacles, especially in areas that have a high prevalence of stunting.

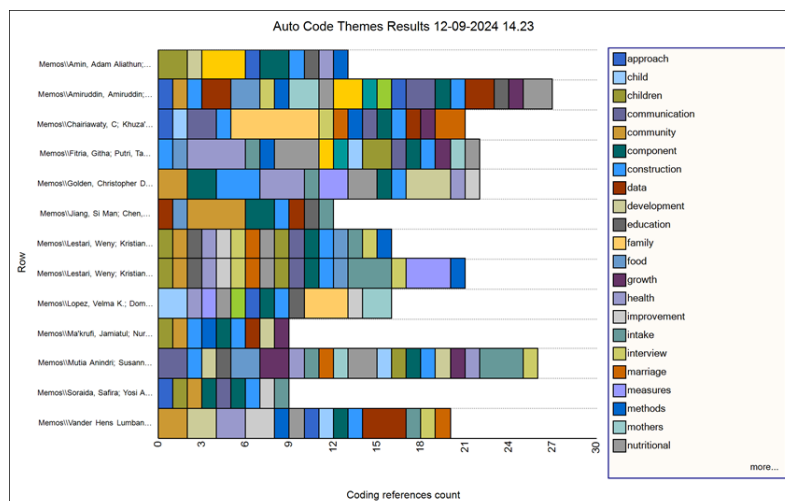
One area that is experiencing serious challenges in stunting prevention is Kepahiang District in Bengkulu Province. Within this district, Kelurahan Durian Depun records a very high prevalence of stunting. Ironically, although Kelurahan Durian Depun is a center of vegetable and fruit production, data shows that the prevalence of stunting in this area is actually increasing. Previous studies have shown that consumption of nutritious foods rich in vegetables and fruits can prevent stunting (Hartati et al., 2021). However, the phenomenon of "hidden hunger" that occurs in this area shows that although children feel full, this is because they are not getting adequate nutrition (Handayani, 2023).

This phenomenon can be influenced by various social and cultural factors. Maternal knowledge and habits in feeding children are important keys in overcoming stunting (Safitra et al., 2021). In Kelurahan Durian Depun, some local habits, such as providing complementary foods before 6 months of age and the use of non-nutritious instant seasonings, can exacerbate the problem of stunting (Sudarma, 2012). In addition, early marriage contributes to parents' low level of nutritional knowledge, which in turn has the potential to increase the risk of stunting in children (Fufa, 2022).

Although various efforts have been made by the Kepahiang District Government, including a mentoring program involving counseling and the provision of nutritious food assistance, data shows that some families in Kelurahan Durian Depun refused the assistance. Some of them consider stunting as a shameful condition, which causes them to be reluctant to acknowledge and accept the assistance provided. This study aims to explore in depth the social construction of women in Kelurahan Durian Depun in relation to fulfilling children's nutritional intake, with a particular emphasis on the factors that influence their decision to provide nutritious food for stunted children. Women's social constructs refer to the perspectives, values and norms that shape their attitudes and behaviors in the context of feeding children (Karman, 2015). By understanding women's perspectives in this regard, this study aims to identify their barriers and motivations in meeting children's nutritional needs.

In this context, this study will analyze various aspects that influence women's decisions, including their knowledge about nutrition and health, myths in the community, and socio-economic conditions that affect their access to and ability to provide nutritious food (Safitra & Rifa'i, 2023). Inadequate knowledge about nutrition, for example, can lead to the selection of less nutritious foods, while local myths or beliefs about food can influence the diet adopted in the family (Affandy, 2019). In addition, socio-economic conditions such as family income, education level and access to resources can also play an important role in determining children's diets (Agustin & Rahmawati, 2021).

There has been a lot of research on stunting and child nutrition, 13 studies based on the search, but there are still significant gaps in understanding the role of food myths in the social construction of women. Despite efforts to improve nutrition knowledge and health interventions, the existence and influence of food myths are often overlooked in academic studies. Previous research has mostly focused on economic and health factors, without exploring in depth how these myths influence women's decisions on child nutrition. In addition, there is no research that specifically examines how local social and cultural constructions influence women's mindsets and practices in overcoming stunting. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how food myths play a role in women's social construction and its impact on fulfilling nutrition for stunted children. This study is expected to provide new insights that are more holistic and contextual in efforts to overcome stunting in Indonesia.



From the literature review conducted, 13 relevant studies were identified through the Dimension database with the keyword "social construction of stunting". The research data was then exported in RIS format and analyzed using VOSviewer software for visualization and mapping of relationships between studies. This step aims to understand the landscape of related research more comprehensively and identify areas that still require further exploration. By understanding the social construction of women more deeply, this research is expected to provide useful insights in designing more targeted and sustainable interventions to address stunting. This research is also expected to contribute to the development of policies and programs that are more effective in tackling stunting, as well as improving the welfare of children in Kelurahan Durian Depun. In addition, the findings from this study can serve as a reference for similar efforts in other areas facing similar challenges, as well as contribute to a broader understanding of how social factors affect children's health.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach because the social phenomena studied are dynamic and require descriptive data. This method emphasizes data collection in the form of human words and actions, not numbers. (Sugiyono, 2014). Researchers will collect information from informants regarding nutritional knowledge, myths, and socio-economic conditions that affect diet. Using a case study approach, this research aims to understand the various factors that influence women's decisions in fulfilling family nutrition in Durian Depun Village, Merigi Sub-district. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document studies, with the researcher as the main instrument (Creswell, 2013). (Creswell, 2013).

### Research Informants

In this study, informants are individuals who provide information about the phenomenon under study (Afrizal, 2014). The researcher used a purposive technique to select informants with certain criteria. This research will involve various key informants from Kelurahan Durian Depun to gain a comprehensive perspective on food myths and nutrition fulfillment in the context of stunting. The informants consist of two women (mothers) who live in Kelurahan Durian Depun, eight married women with stunted children under five, and two husbands of wives whose children suffer from stunting. In addition, two stunted children who are able to interact will also be interviewed to understand their experiences. A midwife from Kelurahan Durian Depun and two members of the local Stunting Task Force provided professional insights regarding stunting management. Finally, the Lurah of Kelurahan Durian Depun is an informant to provide administrative and policy perspectives on this issue.

### Data Collection Technique

In this qualitative research, the main data are words and actions, while additional data involve documents. (Abdussamad, 2021) Data collection is done through three main techniques:

1. **Observation technique:** Researchers directly observed women's behavior and habits in fulfilling family nutrition, including how they manage and provide food. This observation was conducted in conjunction with other techniques to ensure the accuracy of the data and to compare information from interviews with the reality on the ground. (Hasanah, n.d.).
2. **Interview Technique:** Interviews were conducted in an unstructured manner by asking open-ended questions to informants. This process allows researchers to obtain in-depth information and is flexible according to research needs. (Hakim, 2013).

3. **Document collection:** Relevant documents, such as the profile of Kelurahan Durian Depun and stunting prevalence data. It is important to collect relevant documents to support the primary data and provide additional context for the research results. (Waruwu, 2023).

### **Data Analysis Technique**

This research involved categorization, which is the process of collecting data from various sources to identify themes relevant to the research issue. Data is collected and categorized to find significant patterns or meanings (A. Muri Yusuf, 2017). (A. Muri Yusuf, 2017). In addition, this research uses direct interpretation, which focuses on a single instance of data to draw out meaning in depth, and then combines the findings to form a more comprehensive understanding of the case. In pattern formation, relationships or equivalence between data categories were analyzed using tools such as 2x2 tables to explore the interrelationships between different categories and emerging patterns. Finally, the study developed naturalistic generalizations, i.e. conclusions that can be applied to a wider population or similar cases, providing relevant insights for the larger context based on the findings from the case study (Creswell, 2013). (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis techniques in this case study research were applied based on Creswell and Stake's explanation.

## **III. DISCUSSION**

Children's diets and nutritional status are complex issues that are influenced by various factors, including economics, cultural beliefs, food availability, and social constructs (Sabillah Leviana, 2024). In the context of the research "Food Myths and Nutritional Fulfillment: Social Construction of Women in Overcoming Stunting" in Durian Depun Village, this study reveals that economic limitations significantly affect family food choices. These choices often focus on the consumption of rice and simple side dishes to save money. Despite knowledge of the importance of nutritious food, limited budgets inhibit the consumption of foods such as meat, milk and eggs (Parapat et al., 2021). In addition, the traditional belief that rice is the main staple food and the myths associated with some foods shape the diet. The availability of low-quality vegetables and the tendency to choose convenient snacks also contribute to an unhealthy diet. Furthermore, the gap between nutrition knowledge and daily practice as well as social perceptions of stunting affect efforts to tackle the problem.

This discussion will address how these factors interact and affect children's nutritional health, as well as the implications for more effective interventions and policies to combat stunting in Kelurahan Durian Depun. Furthermore, economic limitations significantly affect families' diets by encouraging them to adapt to a limited budget (Surijadi et al., 2021). In many cases, families tend to choose cheaper and more accessible foods such as rice, tempeh and wilted vegetables (Margareta & Purwidiani, 2014). This choice is usually driven by the need to keep expenses to a minimum, despite an awareness of the importance of protein in their diet (Fathia, 2015). As a result, consumption of nutritious foods such as meat, milk and eggs is often neglected. Breakfast, lunch and dinner dominated by rice with simple side dishes are common. The food served usually does not meet balanced nutritional standards, given economic limitations and the availability of quality food ingredients. This minimalist diet can have a negative impact on health, especially in the long term (R & Darmawi, 2022).

Meanwhile, knowledge about nutrition obtained through counseling is not always reflected in daily practice. There is a gap between knowledge gained and practice, which can be caused by old habits, myths, or economic pressures. In addition, the social view that stunting only means short stature and is not a nutrition-related problem shows how community perceptions can influence responses to nutrition problems (Tia et al., 2022). The unwillingness to acknowledge that children are stunted can hinder intervention and remediation efforts (Azzahla & Putri, 2022). These social perceptions reflect the challenges faced in addressing stunting and encourage the need for a more holistic approach to nutrition improvement.

## **IV. FINDINGS**

One of the causes of the high stunting rate in Durian Depun Village is the occurrence of malnutrition in the child's body for a long time, therefore the next effort to overcome stunting in Durian Depun Village is related to the fulfillment of child nutrition. Where various activities in fulfilling various kinds of nutritious foods and drinks are an important part of behavior to improve the health of toddlers who are stunted. This is also a determinant in achieving good health and healing children from stunting cases in Durian Depun Village. Therefore, in mentoring activities for families who have stunted children, information is always given along with providing assistance to fulfill toddler nutrition (Nur Sakina Sahira & Khandika Sara Patla Assariah, 2023). This information is conveyed during posyandu activities and direct assistance by the kelurahan stunting task force. The efforts made by the stunting task force are quite massive where they hold mentoring activities, every week to assist mothers who have stunted children in activities to recover from stunting conditions.

Assistance activities that have consistently been carried out in this Kelurahan are in the form of health counseling, providing information and assistance to get referrals and assisting in the distribution of assistance to families who have stunted children. Where the assistance is in the form of eggs, SGM Milk and other nutritious

foods such as nuggets. The provision of assistance and various counseling and mentoring activities are carried out using the Village Fund (DK) of 25 million per year. Assistance in the form of nutritious food packages is also often distributed by related agencies such as BKKBN.

Basically, to improve the nutritional intake of toddlers can be realized through serving a variety of foods with a diverse and proportional vitamin content so that it has an impact on fulfilling the toddler's body needs for nutrition (Safitra & Rifa'i, 2023). According to (Novianti & Seprianus, 2022) healthy food is healthy eating in the true sense and being able to enjoy the food. Healthy food must be equipped with the main food and supporting food. Currently, foods that contain 4 healthy 5 perfect have begun to fade in popularity, this occurs due to various factors, including changes in behavior patterns related to nutritional fulfillment, changes in food tastes, boredom, and inability to meet these needs (Musfika et al., 2023).

Women who have stunted children basically already have basic knowledge and understanding of the nutritional intake of children that they must fulfill. Even when asked about what nutritious foods must be fulfilled for children, the research informants smoothly explained that these foods consisted of various kinds of vegetables, types of fruits, fish, tempeh, chicken meat, tofu, and rice. However, the knowledge possessed has not been realized in fulfilling the nutritional needs of the family. This study aims to uncover and analyze the factors that influence this condition, focusing on three main aspects. Firstly, local myths about food that are still strongly believed and influence the family's diet. Second, the realization of family nutrition fulfillment, which is often hampered by economic constraints and limited resources. Third, the local knowledge possessed by women in the community and how this knowledge is applied or ignored in daily practice. This shows that women's social construction in stunting prevention is strongly influenced by a combination of knowledge, cultural beliefs, and the economic conditions they face on a daily basis.

Through this research, it is hoped that appropriate and culturally-based solutions can be found to improve children's nutritional fulfillment and address the problem of stunting in Kelurahan Durian Depun. By understanding the social constructs that shape diets and nutrition fulfillment, more effective and locally appropriate interventions can be designed and implemented, helping women in the community in their efforts to overcome stunting.

#### **A. Local Myths about Food**

The existence of myths about food for toddlers, there are some foods that are considered to cause disease for children, one of which is eggs, in the community in Durian Depun Village a myth developed that young children when eating too many eggs will get ulcers, the development of this myth makes mothers who have toddlers reduce the provision of eggs to their children, for fear of their children getting ulcers. When the child gets ulcers, the child will become cranky and can interfere with the mother's activities to do other work, therefore they prefer to avoid giving eggs too often to their children, even though eggs contain high-quality protein, and strangely they also never go to the doctor to check whether their children are allergic to eating eggs or not. The reality of the perceived dangers of eggs for children is part of the externalization process.

In reality, the stock of knowledge is a determining factor for women in choosing behaviors to fulfill children's nutrition, especially through egg consumption. The knowledge that has long been obtained from their parents, which has been passed down from generation to generation, is owned by almost all research informants, so that finally the reality of the behavior of avoiding giving eggs to children is always consistent, and runs naturally in fulfilling their children's daily nutrition, in the end they think it is a habit that is not wrong and is actually good for their children. In addition to myths about eggs, there are also myths about sea fish that can make people poisoned, so giving sea fish is avoided for pregnant women and children.

Furthermore, from the four points of research results on women's social construction of the fulfillment of children's nutritional intake, it can be concluded that research informants have a minimalist diet that is constructed due to the following several things. First, adjustments to family income require that every meal of rice as the main food is always there and is considered the most filling staple food. The side dishes served are usually simple, such as tempeh and stir-fried vegetables, which often use low-quality or wilted vegetables because of the affordable price.

Although the family was aware of the importance of proteins such as meat and milk, consumption of these proteins was rare as they were expensive. Eggs are also given in limited quantities due to myths about ulcers. Second, the knowledge of the importance of rice as a hereditary belief makes them still prioritize rice even with simple and minimalist side dishes, because of the belief that rice is the main food that makes the body healthy even more important than other nutritious foods. Third, myths about food such as the belief that eating too many eggs will cause ulcers so egg consumption is limited, as well as myths about sea fish that can cause poisoning make them avoid sea fish as a source of protein. Fourth, the limited availability of nutritious foods such as low-quality vegetables sold in local markets are often wilted because fresh vegetables are mostly sent to other cities. This makes children dislike vegetables, so they often mix them with instant noodles to increase their appetite. The minimalist meal composition obtained from the research is as follows. Breakfast is usually just rice with a few side dishes such as tempeh or eggs (if available), and simple stir-fried vegetables. Lunch consists of rice with a

simple side dish, such as tempeh, tofu, and some vegetables, with animal protein rarely present except in a very minimal form. Dinner again consists of rice with a similar side dish as lunch, sometimes with instant noodles or a simple side dish.

### **B. Family Nutrition Fulfillment**

All informants stated that although they know that meat and milk are good for their stunted children, they also have to think about other needs, such as school fees, electricity, children's snacks, husband's cigarettes, and others. The mother's knowledge about nutrition is overpowered by the family's income, so they tend to decide to serve the menu for their children that suits their financial condition. Over time, this changes the meaning of healthy food, where they have the assumption that when their children want to eat even though the menu is what it is, their children will eventually become healthy by themselves.

The reality of the construction of women's fulfillment of children's nutritional intake is inseparable from the existence of nutritious food sources sold in the kelurahan market, although this area is one of the vegetable-producing areas, but the reality that occurs is that it is difficult to find quality and fresh vegetables in the kelurahan market, this happens because these vegetables have been sold to areas outside Kepahiang, namely Palembang, Lubuk Linggau and Bengkulu City. So what they consume is quality No. 2 vegetables that are no longer fresh. This makes their children dislike eating vegetables even more, so to overcome this, they mix vegetables with instant noodles. In addition to liking instant noodles, the children of the research informants are also accustomed to snacks such as grilled meatballs, ice candles, sausages. So that when their children have no appetite, the research informants will buy these foods then, such as sausages and meatballs, they will be given together with rice. For research informants, the important thing is that their children are not fussy. Because when children do not want to eat, they will usually fuss, and usually the grandmother of the child also intervenes and will say "Give him what he likes first instead of crying and then he will have a fever first you are also like that" Research informants prioritize children's wishes and there is the influence of words from parents who also remind them of past experiences when they were young, so that in the end they prefer behavior to prioritize so that children are not fussy and want to eat. So that over time this becomes a habit and a wrong behavior is formed in fulfilling nutritional intake for children, so it will be increasingly difficult to cure children from stunting. However, what is interesting is that research informants are not so worried about their children growing short because according to them there is a short heredity, so there is no need to worry, the important thing is that children want to eat over time will grow healthily.

### **b. Local Knowledge**

Knowledge of the primacy of rice is a cultural heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation in this community. Deep beliefs about the role of rice as the main food have shaped the local diet. Informants in this study revealed that within families and communities, there is a strong view that children's bodies will be healthy and strong only with the consumption of rice. They asserted that even if the food is highly nutritious, without rice, children will not feel full or healthy. As a result, in daily practice, the largest portion given to children with stunting is carbohydrates, especially rice, although sometimes only in small amounts, about three mouthfuls. Sources of protein and other nutrients are often inadequate complements. The consequence of this eating habit is the high stunting rate in this area, which remains one of the highest in Kepahiang Regency.

This phenomenon reflects an imbalance in diet caused by the dominance of traditional views that value rice as the main source of nutrition, ignoring the importance of nutritional balance. Despite knowledge of the benefits of other nutritious foods, daily consumption practices are still influenced by local myths and old habits that prioritize rice as the main element in the diet. This suggests the need for more in-depth interventions to change mindsets and dietary practices in these communities to more effectively address stunting.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The conclusion of the research "Food Myths and Nutritional Fulfillment: Social Construction of Women in Overcoming Stunting" in Kelurahan Durian Depun shows that children's diet and nutritional status is a complex issue influenced by various factors, including economics, cultural beliefs, food availability and social construction. Economic limitations significantly affect families' food choices, which often focus on the consumption of rice and simple side dishes to save money. Despite knowledge of the importance of nutritious food, limited budgets inhibit the consumption of foods such as meat, milk and eggs. In addition, traditional beliefs that rice is the main staple food and myths associated with some foods shape the diet. The availability of low-quality vegetables and the tendency to opt for convenience snacks also contribute to an unhealthy diet. Furthermore, the gap between nutrition knowledge and daily practice and social perceptions of stunting affect efforts to tackle the problem. This discussion highlights how these factors interact and affect children's nutritional health, and proposes implications for more effective interventions and policies to address stunting in Kelurahan Durian Depun.

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