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THE ROLE OF FATHERS IN STUNTING PREVENTION IN RURAL AREAS

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ABSTRACT

Background: Stunting remains a persistent health issue in rural Indonesia, exacerbated by socioeconomic disparities and cultural norms. Despite policy focus predominantly on maternal roles, the father's position as family decision-maker in rural settings is crucial yet underexplored. This study aims to explore the role of fathers in preventing stunting among children in rural areas, particularly how masculine norms and limited health access affect their involvement in childcare and nutritional decisions, **Methods:** A qualitative descriptive approach was employed through literature analysis and review of relevant health policy frameworks, especially Law Number 4 of 2024. The analysis examined social constructions, rural masculinity, and the implications of paternal involvement in nursing practices, **Results:** Findings reveal that fathers' roles are constrained by rigid gender norms, lack of knowledge on child nutrition, and limited access to health services. Fathers are largely viewed as economic providers, with minimal engagement in childcare. However, those involved showed improved perception of children's health and contributed positively to nutritional outcomes and access to health facilities. Reconstructing the paternal role through targeted health education, inclusive counselling, and empowerment programs can foster shared parenting responsibility. Community-based approaches and policy alignment are essential to reshape rural masculinity narratives, enhancing stunting prevention effectiveness, **Conclusions:** Fathers' active involvement is pivotal for stunting prevention in rural areas. Integrating them into family health interventions strengthens maternal-child outcomes and promotes equitable parenting. Nursing professionals play a strategic role in facilitating this cultural and behavioral transformation within the family unit.

Keywords: The role of fathers, Stunting prevention barriers, Rural areas

Introduction

Stunting is still a multidimensional and complex public health problem, and has a long-term impact on the quality of a nation's human resources (Susanto et al., 2021). Globally, stunting is defined as a condition of failure to grow in children

under five due to chronic malnutrition and recurrent infections, especially in the first 1,000 days of life from pregnancy to the age of two (Bhadra, 2024). According to a 2023 UNICEF and WHO report, it is estimated that more than 148 million children under the age of five are stunted



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worldwide (Lumbanraja et al., 2024). This figure represents more than one in five children under five who do not grow optimally, both physically and cognitively. Low- and middle-income countries are the regions with the highest burden of stunting, and most of these populations live in rural areas with limited access to basic services.

Indonesia is one of the countries that still faces major challenges in overcoming stunting. Based on data from the 2022 Indonesian Nutrition Status Survey (SSGI), the national stunting prevalence is at 21.6% (Ministry of Health, 2023). Although this figure shows a downward trend compared to previous years, this achievement is still far from the target set in the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) to reduce the prevalence of stunting to 14% by 2024 (Trisilawati et al., 2025). Furthermore, the distribution of stunting cases is geographically uneven. Data shows that rural areas tend to have a higher prevalence than urban areas, indicating structural inequalities in access to nutrition, health, education, and sanitation services. Limited facilities, low levels of education, poverty, and strong local cultural influence, are factors that collectively increase the risk of stunting in rural areas (Laksono et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of high prevalence of stunting in Indonesia mainly occurs in rural areas, which have special characteristics related to social, economic, and cultural factors (Susanto, Rokhani, et al., 2023). In these areas, many families still depend on the agricultural sector as their main livelihood. On the other hand,

limited economic conditions, limited access to education and health services, and a lifestyle that relies more on traditions, are some of the factors that exacerbate the stunting problem. In this context, childcare in farming families often faces major challenges in meeting balanced nutritional needs, which in turn exacerbates the risk of stunting in children (Kibemo et al., 2022).

Stunting prevention not only relies on the mother's efforts as the primary caregiver, but also requires the participation of fathers who are often overlooked in the parenting narrative (Htet et al., 2023). Historically, in many societies, especially in rural communities, the role of fathers in childcare has often been considered limited to providing for the family's economy. As the main breadwinner, fathers often focus more on the material aspect and consider that childcare is the sole responsibility of the mother (Marume et al., 2023). In fact, the involvement of fathers in parenting, both in supporting mothers, ensuring nutritional fulfilment, and in providing access to needed health services, plays a very important role in preventing stunting.

This issue is even more complex given the father's lack of knowledge about the impact of malnutrition on children and the importance of their role in ensuring children's health. Fathers who are not well informed about stunting prevention methods or who do not understand their role in providing support to mothers can make things worse (van Tuijl et al., 2021). In addition, the limited access to information about nutrition and health



experienced by rural communities further increases the gap in handling stunting.

The importance of fathers' involvement in stunting prevention is becoming increasingly clear, but research on this is still relatively limited. While most research focuses on the role of mothers, the role of fathers in supporting the care and prevention of stunting has not received much attention (Amusa et al., 2022). This knowledge gap suggests that although interventions involving mothers have been carried out in an effort to reduce stunting rates, approaches involving both parents, especially fathers, can have a more significant impact on preventing stunting. Therefore, understanding and improving the role of fathers in stunting prevention in rural areas needs to be a key focus in future health intervention policies and programs.

In this context, it is important to explore more deeply regarding the factors that affect fathers' involvement in childcare and stunting prevention, as well as how these roles can be enhanced. By paying attention to social, cultural, economic, and health education aspects, it is hoped that a more comprehensive approach can be created in reducing stunting rates, especially in areas that have greater challenges such as rural areas. Through the empowerment of fathers and families as a whole, it is hoped that more effective and sustainable stunting prevention can be achieved.

Methods

A qualitative descriptive approach was employed through literature analysis and review of relevant health policy frameworks, especially Law Number 4 of

2024. The analysis examined social constructions, rural masculinity, and the implications of paternal involvement in nursing practices.

Results and Discussion

Rural masculinity limits father's role

Child nutrition care is one of the fundamental aspects in supporting healthy and optimal growth and development. However, in rural areas, this important role is often hampered by a variety of social, economic, and cultural factors (Susanto, Ade, et al., 2023). One of the main factors that affect the role of fathers in child nutrition care is the masculinity norms that apply in rural communities (Amusa et al., 2022). Masculinity norms that are thick with patriarchal values often limit the participation of fathers in parenting, especially related to meeting the nutritional needs of children (Paolizzi et al., 2024).

Historically, masculinity norms in many rural societies placed men in the role of the main breadwinners, while women were considered to be more of a role in household affairs and childcare (Wells et al., 2023). This division of roles is often seen as natural and unshakable, thus ignoring the importance of fathers' involvement in more holistic aspects of parenting, including in terms of child nutrition. In fact, optimal nutritional care requires the involvement of both parents, with fathers playing an active role in supporting decisions related to healthy diets and monitoring of children's nutritional status (Mondolin et al., 2024).

In many rural communities, fathers are often assumed to have only economic



responsibilities in the family, while mothers are considered to have a better understanding of the nutritional needs of children (Johnson et al., 2025). This view leads to a lack of participation of the father in activities related to the provision of nutritious food or the planning of a healthy menu for the child. Furthermore, in practice, fathers are often not involved in health consultations or Counselling on the importance of nutrition, which is generally more focused on the role of mothers. This not only limits the involvement of the father, but also has the potential to lead to the father's ignorance of the nutritional issues that are important to the child, which ultimately adversely affects the quality of the care provided (Dabb et al., 2025).

Deep-seated masculinity norms in rural areas also exacerbate gender gaps in families (Holdroyd et al., 2024). When fathers are more often outside the home for work, while mothers take care of children and households, children are indirectly taught to understand rigid gender roles. This norm creates the image that parenting is a woman's domain, while men are only responsible for meeting the family's financial needs (Penilla et al., 2022). In fact, parenting that involves both parents in various aspects, including fulfilling child nutrition, has a more positive impact in supporting children's growth and development optimally.

The limited role of fathers in child nutrition care in rural areas is also caused by other factors, namely lack of information or education related to the role of nutrition in children's health (Watkins et al., 2024). In many rural areas, access to

quality health and nutrition information is still limited (Wells et al., 2024). In addition, the paradigm that considers the role of the father to be limited to earning a living further exacerbates this situation. In this case, it is important to carry out interventions that not only educate mothers, but also involve fathers in various health Counselling programs, especially those that focus on nutritional care. These programs can include family nutrition classes involving fathers and mothers, health counselling through local media, or campaigns that promote fathers' active involvement in childcare.

To create more effective change, there needs to be a systematic effort to redefine the role of masculinity in rural areas. This involves changing society's perspective on narrow masculinity norms and emphasizing the importance of balancing roles between men and women in the family (Aarntzen et al., 2025). Fathers must be given space to play an active role in parenting, both in terms of fulfilling children's nutrition and in supporting parenting emotionally and psychologically (Eriksson & Hajdu, 2021). One way to realize this is through an educational program involving both parents, where fathers are involved in teaching about the importance of nutrition, healthy nutrition, and monitoring child growth and development.

Overall, strong masculinity norms in rural areas are often an obstacle to optimizing the role of fathers in child nurturing. With a change in the paradigm of masculinity that is more inclusive and the active involvement of fathers in parenting, it is hoped that the quality of



child nutrition care can improve. This will not only have an impact on the health and well-being of children, but also on the creation of equal roles between men and women in the family, which in turn will support the creation of a more just and prosperous society.

Fathers' perceptions of children's health roles

Children's health is one of the important aspects of the human development process, which requires more attention in the stages of their growth and development (Susanto et al., 2021). The role of parents, especially fathers, is crucial in ensuring that children receive the right attention related to their health. However, in rural areas, there are a number of challenges that affect fathers' perceptions of children's health, whether it is related to limited information, access to health facilities, or the influence of local culture (Giusto et al., 2021). In general, rural areas are often faced with limited access to quality health services. Health facilities that are far away or lack of adequate medical personnel are the main obstacles faced by the people in the area. In addition, the lack of health education and easily accessible information makes fathers one of the least informed about the importance of fulfilling nutrition, immunizations, and regular health check-ups for their children. This creates a gap in understanding how to take care of children's health optimally (Mendes et al., 2024).

In many cultures, the role of the father in the health of the child is often more focused on the economic aspects of the family, such as working to make ends

meet (Wells et al., 2024). In this case, the father is considered the figure responsible for the survival of the family through the provision of financial resources, while the mother plays a more dominant role in the daily care of the child. This view often influences the way fathers view their role in children's health (Rudelli et al., 2021). However, the role of fathers in families in rural areas is increasingly changing as awareness of the importance of parental involvement in children's growth and development, including in terms of health. Based on several studies, it has been found that fathers who are more involved in parenting and family health tend to have a better perception of the importance of children's health (Noergaard et al., 2024). Fathers who have a better understanding of nutrition, immunization, and disease prevention are usually more proactive in ensuring that their children get the health care they need. The role of fathers in child health is also related to a change in the mindset of society that is increasingly open to a more equitable division of roles between fathers and mothers in terms of parenting and care (Mondolin et al., 2024). It also reflects a shift in social and cultural structures that previously emphasized maternal dominance in childcare matters.

One of the factors that affect fathers' perceptions of children's health roles is the level of education and access to health information (Paolizzi et al., 2024). In rural areas, although access to formal education can be limited, the presence of health Counselling from related institutions, such as posyandu or puskesmas, can open up insights for fathers about the importance of regular



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health check-ups, nutritious food, and disease prevention. In addition, with the rapid development of communication technology, health information can be more easily accessed, even in remote areas. This allows fathers to be more informed and can make more informed decisions regarding their children's health (de Vries et al., 2022).

However, despite progress in improving fathers' knowledge of child health, the biggest challenge remains limited access to health services. Affordable health centres or health facilities are often not easily accessible to families in rural areas, both because of their long distances and because of limited medical personnel. This condition exacerbates children's health problems in the area, given the importance of regular check-ups and preventive measures that can be taken early (Eriksson & Hajdu, 2021).

It is important to realize that a change in fathers' perceptions of a child's health role is not achievable in a short period of time (Ljungberg et al., 2024). A more inclusive and community-based approach is needed, involving both fathers and mothers in health counselling programs. In addition, the participation of government and community institutions in providing health information that is easy to understand and access will be very helpful in forming fathers' awareness of the importance of maintaining children's health. Policies that support the provision of health facilities that are closer and easier to reach are also needed to reduce existing barriers to access (Xiao et al., 2024).

Overall, fathers' perceptions of the role of children's health in rural areas are influenced by a variety of factors, including limited access to health information and services, cultural influences that place the role of fathers more on the economic aspects of the family, and social changes that have begun to introduce the importance of the role of both parents in childcare. For this reason, holistic interventions, involving health education, increasing access to health services, and strengthening the role of fathers in the family, will contribute to the creation of a healthier environment for children in rural areas. Thus, through the active involvement of fathers in children's health, it is hoped that there will be improvements in the quality of life and more optimal development of children.

The virtue of the role of fathers in raising children

Law Number 4 of 2024 concerning the Welfare of Mothers and Children in the First Thousand Days of Life Phase (Indonesia, 2024) affirms the importance of holistic health interventions during the critical period of a child's life, i.e. in the first thousand days phase, which covers the gestation period up to the age of two. This law focuses attention on efforts to improve the welfare of mothers and children by emphasizing the importance of nutrition, good parenting, and access to optimal health services. Specifically, the Law plays a role in strengthening health development efforts at the family level, where the welfare of mothers and children is a top priority. However, the implementation of this policy cannot run effectively without the active involvement



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of all family members, including men as agents of change.

In the context of households in rural areas, where social and cultural norms often give dominance to the role of men as heads of families or decision-makers, the role of men is crucial in supporting health policies regulated in the Law. While women are often identified as the primary guardians of family health, men, as heads of households, have a major influence on decision-making regarding optimal nutrition, access to health services, and childcare (McCann et al., 2024). Therefore, policies targeting men as agents of change are not only relevant, but also support the objectives of applicable regulations to create an environment that supports maternal and child growth and development, especially in the first thousand days phase.

Law Number 4 of 2024 concerning Maternal and Child Welfare in the First Thousand Days of Life Phase pays great attention to the importance of good nutrition and the provision of proper intake during pregnancy and the first two years of a child's life. In rural areas, where access to health services and information is often limited, men's role as decision-makers in the family is key (Watkins et al., 2024). If men are involved in understanding the importance of nutrition during pregnancy and exclusive breastfeeding, they can be more proactive in supporting mothers to get nutritious food and ensure access to necessary health facilities (Holdroyd et al., 2024). Furthermore, men who are empowered with information related to the first thousand days phase can be a very important source of support for mothers,

given that women's workloads in the agricultural sector or in busy daily lives often limit their ability to access health services on a regular basis.

In addition, health policies involving men are in line with applicable regulatory principles emphasizing the importance of parenting based on emotional closeness and adequate attention to children. Men as parents, especially fathers, have a very important role in accompanying and supporting mothers in childcare (Mendes et al., 2024). By providing health education that targets men, this policy can help introduce the role of fathers in providing stimulation that supports children's physical and mental development, including paying greater attention to activities such as infant care, motor stimulation, and supervision of children's growth and development at an early age (Giusto et al., 2021).

The success of this policy in the context of applicable regulations can be realized by paying attention to the culture and social norms in rural communities which often place men as the authorities in family decision-making. By targeting men, these policies can change mindsets and attitudes when it comes to family health, provide opportunities for men to understand the importance of their role in maternal and child health, and encourage them to be an active part of greater social change towards healthier families (Dabb et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the implementation of applicable regulations will be more effective if supported by policies that educate men in rural communities about the importance of their role. For example,



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Counselling on the importance of fathers' roles in fulfilling the nutrition of pregnant women and children, as well as their role in accompanying mothers to check themselves regularly during pregnancy, will encourage men to more actively participate in maintaining maternal and child health, as well as ensuring that basic needs during the first thousand-day phase can be optimally achieved (Noergaard et al., 2024).

Overall, the correlation between policies targeting men as agents of change in households in rural areas and applicable regulations is very close and mutually supportive. Men as agents of change have great potential to improve the quality of maternal and child health in the first thousand days of life, by ensuring better access to health services, increasing understanding of the importance of good nutrition, and being actively involved in childcare. Therefore, health policies that involve men in the process of change are strategic steps that support the achievement of the main goal of the law, namely the creation of a healthy and productive generation from the early stages of life.

Implications for Nursing

As the head of the family and the main decision-maker, fathers play a very strategic role in ensuring that families have good access to health services, nutritious food, and a proper understanding of child parenting (Mondolin et al., 2024). The active involvement of fathers in stunting prevention in rural areas has a significant impact on maternal and child health, especially in critical phases such as pregnancy and the first two years of a

child's life. The implications of the father's role in stunting prevention can be explained through several important aspects in nursing practice.

1. Health Education and Counselling

Nursing has an important role in providing health education to families, including fathers, regarding the importance of fulfilling proper nutrition during pregnancy and the first two years of a child's life. Counselling involving fathers can increase their understanding of the importance of their role in supporting pregnant women to obtain adequate nutritional intake and ensure exclusive breastfeeding to the baby. By increasing fathers' knowledge about the influence of nutrition on children's development, they can be more active in making decisions that support stunting prevention, such as providing nutritious food for pregnant women and children, and supporting mothers to regularly check their health at health care facilities.

2. Male Empowerment in Family Health

In the context of stunting prevention, paternity empowerment is an important step that must be taken by nursing personnel. This empowerment can be done by involving fathers in child health monitoring activities, such as posyandu visits or routine health checkups. In addition, nursing personnel can also provide information about the importance of father's involvement in accompanying mothers during pregnancy and in childcare. By involving fathers in the care and care of children, including in providing



nutritious food and stimulating good child development, it will create a deeper awareness of the importance of the role of fathers in stunting prevention.

3. Improving Access to Healthcare

In rural areas, limited access to health facilities and low knowledge about health can be major obstacles to stunting prevention. Nursing can play a role in identifying and overcoming these barriers, by providing information to fathers about the importance of bringing pregnant women and children for regular check-ups at health facilities. Fathers who understand their role in facilitating access to health services can help ensure that their families get the necessary screenings, such as nutritional screenings, immunizations, and child growth and development monitoring. This can reduce the risk of stunting which is often caused by delays in accessing proper health services.

4. The Role of Fathers in Parenting and Stimulating Child Development

In addition to ensuring adequate nutrition, the role of the father is also very important in parenting and stimulating child development. Nursing, in this case, can provide fathers with an understanding of the importance of emotional interaction and physical stimulation to support optimal child growth and development. Fathers who are involved in parenting activities, such as playing and talking with children, can help speed up a child's brain development and reduce the risk of developmental disorders that can

contribute to stunting. Nursing involving fathers in parenting activities will improve the quality of care received by children and accelerate early detection of developmental disorders.

5. Creating a Family Environment That Supports Health

Health policies that prioritize the role of fathers in stunting prevention must be supported by nursing personnel who can create a family environment that supports health. In nursing practice, this means helping families to create a safe, comfortable, and supportive environment for children's growth and development. Fathers who are involved in creating a healthy environment, such as keeping the home clean, avoiding exposure to disease, and providing a conducive space for learning and development, play an important role in preventing stunting.

6. Involvement in Posyandu and Community Empowerment Programs

In many rural areas, posyandu is one of the health programs that brings health services closer to families. Fathers' involvement in posyandu programs not only strengthens their understanding of the importance of child growth monitoring, but can also raise awareness about their role in stunting prevention. Nursing can facilitate fathers' involvement in posyandu by providing clear and detailed information about the benefits of the program and inviting them to actively participate in monitoring children's health, including weight, height, and other nutritional indicators.



Conclusion

The role of fathers in stunting prevention in rural areas is very important and has far-reaching implications in nursing practice. Nursing, as part of a family-oriented health system, can strengthen the role of the father by providing education, empowerment, and practical support in the care and fulfilment of children's nutritional needs. By actively involving fathers, it is hoped that significant changes will be created in stunting prevention, improving maternal and child health, and creating healthier and more prosperous families in rural areas.

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