

TRANSFORMATIVE FAMILY ROLES IN CHILD ADVOCACY: AMPLIFYING RIGHTS THROUGH AWARENESS RAISING AND CAPACITY BUILDING IN LESOTHO

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Abstract

Lesotho's rich socio-cultural tapestry offers a distinctive setting for probing child rights and development. Central to this discourse is the concept of child rights, deeply entrenched within the vast realm of human rights, acting as a linchpin for comprehensive development. Yet, the trajectory of this development is frequently hampered by deep-seated social norms which prescribe gender-specific roles in child advocacy, with an extrapolated impact on family dynamics. This intricate meta-analysis delves into UNICEF Lesotho's research undertakings from 2023, aiming to shed light on the roles of family members, with an accentuated emphasis on men. Their roles are not just dissected as advocates for child rights but also as integral components of the familial structure. Through an exhaustive evaluation of two salient projects from that year – a three-year HIV-nutrition project and a breastfeeding study – the research meticulously navigates patterns of family engagement, leveraging a plethora of resources from inception reports to raw data compilations. Initial findings bring to the fore an intriguing narrative: while societal norms have traditionally marginalized men's active roles in child advocacy, their influence within family structures is undeniable. This dichotomy posits men as untapped advocates for child rights within the familial arena, leading to the pressing need for their more substantive involvement. Central to the study is the assertion that learning, and capacity-building are indispensable in reshaping the contours of male involvement. By equipping family members, especially men, with enhanced awareness, knowledge, and tools, their transition from passive observers to proactive advocates for child rights can be realized. Enhanced awareness and continuous capacity-building initiatives can kindle a profound change, harnessing men's intrinsic familial stature. To conclude, this comprehensive meta-analysis illuminates the complex interweaving of social norms, familial dynamics, gender equality, and child advocacy in Lesotho. It underscores the transformative potential inherent in enhancing the capacities of family members, particularly men. By galvanizing men as pivotal members within families and impassioned advocates for child rights, we are poised to pioneer a transformative shift, heralding a more inclusive and enlightened era for child development in Lesotho.

Keywords: *Child rights advocacy, gender equality, familial dynamics, awareness raising, capacity building.*

1. Introduction

Lesotho stands out globally as the only country perched entirely above the 1,000-meter mark, cradled by the vastness of South Africa. Amidst its soaring highlands, the nation grapples with a gamut of developmental hurdles that span the domains of economic progress, education, healthcare, and the stewardship of its environment (Mairos Ferreira & Muthengi, 2023a; Government of Lesotho, 2023a, 2023b; IMF, 2022; Leenknecht *et al.*, 2021; Paramaiah, Machema, & Gomo, 2020). The youth of Lesotho, set against the country's striking topography and socio-political intricacies, are particularly affected (United Nations Children's Fund & Lesotho Red Cross Society, 2023). The tendrils of governance and stability are strained under these multifaceted pressures, with political volatility not just undermining the pillars of authority but also stifling economic vitality, casting the young into a precarious state that demands solid institutional backing (United Nations Lesotho, 2023; UNDP & UN Women, 2023). The nutritional quandary in Lesotho unfolds as a tangled web of undernutrition, overnutrition, and micronutrient shortages, collectively illustrating a profound malnutrition dilemma. A staggering 34.6% prevalence of stunting among children under five years old serves as a stark emblem of entrenched socioeconomic strife, further exacerbated by a Global Hunger Index score of 32.4 that paints a grim

picture of food security. Concurrently, the nation's battle against HIV/AIDS, marked by one of the highest infection rates worldwide at approximately 19.3% among adults, adds layers to the public health exigencies (UNAIDS, 2023, 2022). This confluence of malnutrition and disease, particularly highlighted by the distressing stunting figures, signals an urgent call for comprehensive health interventions (iQvia, 2023). While Lesotho has attained notable successes in HIV/AIDS management through diagnosis and treatment, the full exploitation of family-based advocacy has not been reached. Despite a 94% rate of awareness among individuals with HIV, the significantly lower rates of early infant diagnosis point to a chasm where the empowerment of families could be significantly beneficial (iQvia, 2023; Schwitters *et al.*, 2022).

This paper embarks on an exploration of family-centric, inclusive, and gender-sensitive modalities as keys to unlocking the complex nexus of HIV and nutrition challenges in Lesotho (iQvia, 2023; Mantsopa Institute & UNICEF, 2022). It delves into a meta-analysis of UNICEF Lesotho's research undertakings from 2023, dissecting the fabric of Lesotho's social conventions, family structures, gender identities, and the championing of children's rights. There's an acute focus on redefining the male role within these paradigms, challenging entrenched gender norms, and recognizing the untapped potential in men to serve as agents of familial transformation. Advocating for a robust initiative in capacity building and consciousness-raising among kin, this research positions the family nucleus, with a renewed emphasis on the pivotal role of men, at the forefront of an evolutionary journey. Thus, it aims to carve a path to an epoch of child development in Lesotho marked by equity, inclusivity, and the collective commitment of all family members.

2. Methodology

This qualitative meta-analysis serves as a confluence of perspectives derived from two complementary studies. The initial study meticulously evaluated a Nutrition-HIV Program extending over three years (2019-2022), utilizing a thematic analysis framework to parse through extensive program documentation, stakeholder discourse, and direct observation (iQvia, 2023). The emergent themes, underscored by longitudinal data, provided an insightful narrative on the program's success in empowering women and girls, as told through the lived experiences of those within the target demographic. These participant narratives are pivotal, shedding light on the nexus between program initiatives and their tangible impact on health and gender empowerment. Complementing the first, the Breastfeeding Study engaged in a descriptive analysis, deciphering the socio-cultural determinants shaping maternal breastfeeding practices (Mairós Ferreira, 2023). Through an iterative coding process, the study ensured that emerging themes dynamically influenced the ongoing data collection, anchoring the conclusions in the authentic experiences of the participants. The meta-synthesis of this data cast light on the complex barriers and enablers of breastfeeding practices, particularly within the intimate setting of family units. It underlined the nuanced balance between traditional practices and women's autonomy in the domain of maternal and child health, a delicate equilibrium of custom and personal agency. Ensuring the integrity of this qualitative meta-analysis, a rigorous triangulation process was integral to substantiate the credibility of the findings. Data triangulation juxtaposed and synthesized results from both studies, despite their distinct focal areas—the overarching health impacts of a Nutrition-HIV Program and the particularities of breastfeeding practices. This cross-examination of data points, especially those concerning the empowerment of women and girls in health-related decision-making, served to reinforce the validity of the themes identified. Methodological triangulation further enriched the analysis, leveraging the unique and collective strengths of the diverse methods employed in each study. This multipronged approach not only provided a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena but also preemptively addressed potential biases, offering a holistic view of the cultural and social contexts that govern maternal health practices. The iterative coding and analysis cycles assured thematic consistency and authenticity, culminating in a robust and insightful synthesis essential for navigating the intricate landscape of family participation against the backdrop of Lesotho's public health challenges.

3. Findings and discussion

The complex interplay between Lesotho's policy commitments to gender equality and the on-the-ground realities is starkly apparent in the realm of family dynamics, particularly regarding men's roles in health and nutrition. Despite constitutional assurances since 1993 and international ratifications, including CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol, which advocate for women's rights, there persists a dissonance between formal legislative frameworks and the actual lived experiences within households. In fact, Lesotho still has a marked patriarchal culture, which has strong implications for families (Mairós Ferreira & Muthengi, 2023a; UNDP & UN Women, 2023; UNICEF & Lesotho Red Cross Society

Reports, 2023). This gap underscores the need for strategies that not only recognize but actively incorporate men as essential contributors to gender parity within familial settings. Men's roles in Lesotho's families, traditionally characterized by financial control and decision-making authority, continue to significantly shape the structure and function of households. This enduring male dominance, while rooted in cultural tradition, actively influences the aspirations and opportunities available to both women and girls, and men and boys (UNDP & UN Women, 2023; UNICEF & Lesotho Red Cross Society Reports, 2023). The meta-analysis findings, further emphasize this point, revealing the extent of women's economic dependence on men and the limited autonomy that ensues from such a dynamic. The economic dependency highlighted by the Breastfeeding Study, where 66.0% of women rely on maintenance money from male partners, is a critical indicator of the restricted decision-making power of women in Lesotho (Mairós Ferreira, 2023). The role of extended family members, particularly grandmothers, in decision-making processes, remains significant, with the Breastfeeding Study noting that approximately 11.3% of decisions are made jointly with extended family, and 6.2% are made solely by these members. This dependency not only underscores the limited financial autonomy women experience but also serves as a proxy for broader issues of gendered power imbalances within the family unit, namely the lack of autonomy in decisions regarding children health (iQvia, 2023).

Despite these entrenched patriarchal norms, signs of a shift towards more egalitarian family structures are emerging, as evidenced by the promising trend towards increased equality and joint decision-making processes, with around 27.9% of mothers reporting shared decision-making in child-feeding practices with fathers or partners (Mairós Ferreira, 2023). Furthermore, the HIV-Nutrition Program has marked a significant change in male participation in family health, notably in antenatal care and nutrition, reflecting a departure from conventional gender roles and the promotion of a balanced sharing of responsibilities. "The program's findings confirmed that male support is a key factor in facilitating women's and children's access to health services (...) Additionally, men could progressively assume a more active role in household nutrition through farming" (iQvia, 2023, Final Evaluation Report, p. 70). According to the Final evaluation results, the observed shift in male behavior through the HIV-Nutrition Program represents a broader societal transformation. Men's increased involvement in areas previously perceived as female domains, such as child nutrition and HIV awareness, marks a notable departure from previous patterns, where engagement was minimal and gender roles were more rigid. This shift is a testament to the program's success in challenging and changing deep-seated gender norms, paving the way for a new paradigm of inclusive and shared responsibility in family health.

Furthermore, the program's conclusion draws attention to the effectiveness of tailored interventions and health forums in advancing male understanding and engagement in HIV prevention and nutritional health. "This initiative does more than just disseminate health knowledge; it fundamentally addresses gender inequality by empowering men to be enablers in the healthcare journey of their female partners, particularly in accessing antenatal care and PMTCT services" (iQvia, 2023, p. 70). This underscores the potential for education and dialogue to meaningfully involve men in family and community health. By providing knowledge and platforms for engagement, men can significantly contribute to the health and well-being of their families, as demonstrated by the program's findings. Lastly, the impact of the program transcends immediate behavioral changes and sets in motion a process of intergenerational learning that promises to reshape future societal norms. Engaging men in conversations and practices related to health and nutrition, has laid the strong foundations for a continuous, and sustainable, effect of positive change (iQvia, 2023). This engagement not only benefited the current generation but also sown the seeds for future generations to embrace a more equitable understanding of gender roles within the family, as indicated by the promising trends in familial decision-making. As clearly stated in the Final Evaluation Report, this has created a "ripple effect of positive behavioral change that can influence future generations, thereby amplifying the long-term overall impact of the Program" (iQvia, 2023, pp. 14-15).

The challenge now lies in translating these findings into actionable strategies that can close the gap between policy and practice. This necessitates culturally informed interventions that recognize and utilize the influence of men within the family structure to advance gender equality. By engaging men in redefining masculinity and fostering more equitable family dynamics, these strategies can support the health and rights of women and girls while contributing to the broader societal transformation. The meta-analysis serves as an imperative for targeted strategies that align with and seek to evolve the socio-political fabric of Lesotho, reinforcing the pivotal role of men in achieving sustainable gender parity.

4. Conclusion

The empirical data gathered from Lesotho's health and nutrition initiatives articulate a clear finding: the inclusion of men as integral agents of change within family units is not merely beneficial but necessary for the efficacy of health and nutrition interventions. Engaging men transcends traditional gender roles, catalyzing a paradigm shift towards a more equitable intrafamilial dynamic. This recalibration is rooted in a scientific understanding that health outcomes are significantly improved when interventions are family-centric and gender-inclusive. Men's increased involvement in family health practices—ranging from prenatal care to nutritional planning—has been empirically linked to positive outcomes, including enhanced child health and lower incidences of malnutrition. The active participation of men in these roles is more than a mere shift in responsibility; it is a strategic enhancement of the family's health advocacy potential, ensuring that interventions are not only embraced but also sustained across generations. This scientific perspective affirms that by harnessing the full spectrum of familial roles, Lesotho can advance toward its health goals with greater efficacy and resilience.

It is essential that health interventions in Lesotho incorporate strategies specifically designed to engage men as active participants in family health and nutrition. Programs should include targeted educational campaigns that simultaneously address and reshape traditional gender roles, fostering an environment where men are equally informed, strongly supported, and continuously motivated in their path to equally contribute to the health and well-being of their families. Additionally, policy frameworks must prioritize the establishment, and strengthening, of community forums and support groups that provide spaces for men to learn, share, and collaborate on health-related issues. These initiatives should be coupled with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that assess the effects and added value of male involvement, thereby ensuring that these strategies are refined and adapted to the cultural context of Lesotho. By implementing these recommendations, Lesotho can leverage the full capacity of its familial units, driving forward a more equitable and health-oriented societal transformation.

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