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Socio-Cultural Beliefs Influence the Dietary Practices of Mothers and Children in The Chakhesang Tribe of Northeast India

Introduction: In the pre-Christian era, cultural taboos, prohibitions, and restrictions were cautiously adhered to due to the fear of supernatural consequences. However, even after adopting Christianity, these practices were not entirely eradicated, although they dwindled. The paper examines the extent to which socio-cultural beliefs on feeding practices persist in the face of changing societal dynamics.

Methods: A quantitative study was conducted among 445 mothers/caregivers of children under 5 years old. In addition, a qualitative study with 9 key informants and 18 in-depth interviews was conducted with mothers from 9 villages in Phek district, Nagaland. The study results were presented using descriptive statistics, bivariate analysis, and qualitative analysis with an inductive approach.

Result: The study reveals that although 98.8% of children aged 6-23 months are breastfed, only a quarter are exclusively breastfed. At 6 to 7 months old, infants are introduced to rice porridge, which is organically grown, and rich in carbohydrates. 9.6% of mothers responded that food taboos exist during pregnancy and 92% of women have diet restrictions during pregnancy. Women follow a stern diet during pregnancy, certain foods like bananas, honey, crab, and fish are restricted to avoid complications during pregnancy and delivery. Post-delivery mothers are strictly advised to consume only non-vegetarian food to aid post-delivery recovery and boost breast milk production. Most mothers continued to adhere to cultural beliefs, leading them to neglect nutrient-rich foods. However good practices such as keeping the infant warm, consuming locally grown food, and strong community bonding during childbirth kept the mother and child healthy.

Conclusion: Educational interventions are necessary to enhance awareness about the negative impact of certain socio-cultural practices on maternal and child health. Whereas positive and negative dietary practices of mothers and children influenced by cultural factors should be considered for further nutrition programs.

Keywords: Indigenous, Tribes, Food, Restriction, Children

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