

**Mothers' Voices from the Kitchen: Understanding Daily Feeding Practices for
Preschool Children in Rupandehi District of Nepal**

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Abstract

Background: Food practices are influenced by various interconnected factors such as individual preference, socio-cultural norms and marketing. **Objective:** This study explores how mothers perceive and manage daily food behaviors for their children. **Methods:** In this qualitative descriptive research semi-structured interviews were taken from purposely selected thirteen mothers of early childhood development children in Rupandehi district of Nepal, ensuring diversity in ethnicity, educational attainment, and maternal age. The response was coded manually by seeking recurring themes and grouping based on the type of foods. **Result:** The study revealed that mothers act as central agents in shaping children's dietary routines, grounded in traditions, economic realities, health awareness, and evolving food environments. Meals like dal-bhat-tarkari were common, while breakfast and dinner practices varied depending on ethnic background, time constraints, and perceived child preferences. Despite low literacy among some mothers, there was a visible commitment to providing home-cooked and relatively nutritious food. **Conclusion:** The dietary practices of children are culturally rooted. There is a variation of food diversity in cultures. Culturally embedded caregiving, food choice of the children and availability of time to feed have critical role in balanced diet of children. These findings have implications for policy development in eating behavior of children in Nepal and similar socio-economic contexts.

Keywords: Breakfast, Children, Mothers' Perception, Daily Food practices

Introduction

The kitchen is not like a frame, where food choice and identity of cultures come together (Annie Hauck, 2024). As Wright-Pedersen and Gallegos (2024) articulated in most families, the voice that emanates from the kitchen is usually that of the primary caregiver or mother figure. The mother's role goes beyond meal provision; she also conveys principles and practices of health, nourishment, and social etiquette through overt and covert social instructions (Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2018).

Healthy eating habits formed by children may persist throughout their lives, and these habits can be influenced by daily routines, including meal preparation and serving sizes (Adhikari, Sharma, & Giri, 2025). A prerequisite understanding of cultural traditions, household food security, health knowledge, socioeconomic means, and a complex interplay of different aspects impact the mother's decision-making (Birch & Ventura, 2009; Dev et al., 2016). It is useful to notice the importance of the kitchen as one of the informal educational institutions where children are socialized to food practices and attitudes (Annie Hauck, 2024). According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), eating habits of the children are the results of interactions between personal behaviors, and the social and home environment. Moreover, mothers' daily food selections to their children are inclined by their beliefs, self-efficacy, cultural norms, time restrictions, and economic constrain, principally during routine meals such as breakfast, lunch, and dinner (Sims et al., 1972; Contento, 2016).

In South Asia, particularly in Nepal, caregivers are largely in responsibility of food preparation and nutrition choices. As such, their daily routines and decisions are crucial to comprehending more general trends in the health and well-being of the household (Gartaula et al., 2017). While dietary intake and nutritional outcomes have frequently been the focus of quantitative research (Sharma et al., 2024; Sharma & Budhathoki, 2023), qualitative studies are increasingly valued for their ability to capture the complex lived experiences and meanings that underpin behaviors related to food (Kegler et al., 2019; Slocum, 2016). In Nepal, socio-economic status, cultural and regional differences, and availability of food can have different effects on what and how people eat during the day (Adhikari, Giri, & Sharma et al., 2024). Understanding what mothers eat, how they prepare it, and the values or restrictions underlying these patterns sheds light on both individual choices and structural influences such as market access, time constraints, and cultural expectations (Ali & Abdoulaye, 2022). Furthermore, another study encouraged and reported that in order to maximize the advantages of each strategy and produce more comprehensive and significant results, food study involving children requires the qualitative, innovative, and traditional methods (Pater et al., 2025).

While prior studies have examined caregivers' eating habits (Sharma & Budhathoki, 2023) and emotional care (Sharma et al., 2025) on children's nutritional and cognitive

development, few have explicitly explored caregivers' daily food practices qualitatively and narratively in the Nepali context. Most national research will often focus on outcomes such as wasting and stunting (Atzori et al., 2024) without taking seriously household-level dynamics and decision-making patterns behind such outcomes. Furthermore, the shortage of qualitative studies capable of revealing the complexities of caregiving roles in food preparation intensifies the need for this study. In the same vein, gaining these perceptions is essential in developing culturally sensitive and sustainable interventions that actually reflect the true local realities. Through the analysis of these otherwise marginalized perspectives, the study aims to advance an enriched understanding of how nutrition decision-making is influenced at the household level.

In nutshell, nutritional research in Nepal is mainly quantitative and focuses on stunting and wasting, with limited emphasis on household decision-making and mother's lived experiences in a qualitative way. Therefore, this study seeks to reveal the everyday food practices of children and the determinants of food choice, aiming to explore how mothers perceive and manage their children's daily eating behaviors at breakfast, lunch and dinner, grounded on Social Cognitive Theory and Theoretical Model of Nutritional Status.

Methods

The study conducted qualitative investigation within Rupandehi District of Western Tarai, Nepal which is renowned for its diverse social-cultural landscape alongside rapid urban development and evolving dietary patterns. The researchers intentionally selected this particular location because it serves as a miniature representation of nationwide developments that showcase the clash between traditional caregiving responsibilities and present-day nutritional deficiencies. Food security alongside caste-related dietary disparities and household gender roles remains the core elements that link children's daily food experiences with their living conditions despite the national implementation of Multi-Sector Nutrition Plan II between 2018 and 2022 (Government of Nepal, 2017). Such deeply rooted conditions rendered Rupandehi a realistically valid and evocative context within which to examine how mother's voices and kitchen caregiving practices influence children's food consumption. Data were collected between 20th April and 2nd May, 2021, from 13 mothers of preschool children enrolled in community based Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers and selected purposively, ensuring diversity in ethnicity, educational attainment, and maternal age. Interviews were conducted at sometimes in participants' homes and ECD centers.

Data was collected through in-depth and face-to-face interviews from a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews disclosed dominant themes such as normal meal patterns, food preparation behavior, and decision-making behind food choice and restraint. The overall question asked was what are your eating habits at the time of breakfast, lunch and dinner?

and how do you prepare it? Interviews were sustained until a saturation point had been reached because the time when no new information or themes emerged from additional interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Saturation was realized in that repeated patterns were continually textured over and over in the mothers' accounts of cultural, nutritional, and emotional significance drawn from their everyday food practice. Data were manually coded to ensure integrity and credibility. To improve rigor, we triangulated coding selections by cross-checking with different researchers, and the study team examined and discussed emergent themes to guarantee consistency, depth, and correct portrayal of participants' experiences for a comprehensive thematic analysis. We further ensured qualitative rigor through purposeful sampling, extensive fieldwork, careful hand-coding of transcripts, iterative theme development, and maintaining an audit record of coding decisions to enhance the reliability, transparency, and trustworthiness of the analysis.

Ethical Consideration

Prior to data collection, we obtained ethical approval from the Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC approval No. 2078-56/2021). Before conducting the interviews, written informed consent was received, and participants were given thorough explanations of the study's objectives. All identifying information was eliminated from the transcripts to ensure anonymity, and participants were given the assurance that their answers would only be utilized for study. The interview was conducted in a calm, private environment for the subjects. Participants were free to leave the research at any time.

Results

The food practices of children have been explored in cultural, social, and familial contexts, and mothers often play a central role in shaping these practices within households.

The study revealed different types of food items consumed by children in the morning, day and evening in the context of Rupandehi district of Nepal.

Breakfast Feeding Practice of children

Most families began their days with tea, biscuits, or simple foods like roti or *bhuja*. Some mothers used prepared or leftover food, particularly those from homes where parents leave early for work. According to the current study, the most popular breakfast items are roti, bread, tea, *bhuja*, dry *Samosas*, *haluwa*, noodles and eggs. Regarding the breakfast, a mother of this study shared that *my child eats bhuja, paratha, and roti alternatively in the morning breakfast regularly. Sometimes hot water, roti/haluwa/ biscuit with tea* (A mother of basic level education aged 41). Contradictorily, another mother said that “the regular habit of my child is to eat *dal, bhat and tarkari* in every morning (A mother of secondary level education aged 27). In addition, another mother added that *we give a cup of milk to our daughter in the morning every day. She also eats chebanpras and biscuits with milk in*

the morning (A mother of secondary level education aged 36). Even though, an illiterate mother added that “our children eat *puri and tarkari, and sometimes bhuja and kera* for breakfast (A illiterate mother of aged 35).

From the above quotations we can say that mothers' educational backgrounds, cultural customs, and household resources all have an impact on the study children's diverse breakfast habits. These variations show that context-specific nutrition strategies are necessary instead of a one-size-fits-all strategy.

Lunch Feeding Practice of children

In this study, mothers perceived that lunch is necessary for children's better cognitive development and overall well-being. In this line, a mother said that *my children eat rice, pulses and curry as lunch in regular way dal, bhat and sabji are common in our kitchen* (A mother of basic level education aged 33). Similarly, another mother added that *we eat rice, vegetable, pulses and our children also eat remaining food as a lunch* (A mother of basic level education aged 32). Contradictorily, another mother reported that *we eat pulses, curry and rice as a lunch and a banana if available; our daughter takes tea and bhuja when come from school and also she eats a boiled egg in lunch* (A mother of basic level education aged 28).

These quotations highlighted that the mothers who took part in the study stressed the importance of lunch as a priority area of supplying nutrients to the child's better educational attainment and general health. Most of them, they supply a traditional diet of rice, pulses, and vegetables locally known as *dal, bhat, and sabji* giving less priority to fruits as they feed it when available.

Dinner/Evening Eating Behaviors of Children

In this study, dinner was similar to lunch in many families. *Dal-Bhat-Tarkari* remained in power. Some families ate meat or fish on other days. Fried food was rarely eaten because to health problems like gallstones and high blood pressure.

In this scenario, a mother illustrated that in the evening, *my children eat rice pulses and curry Sometimes, we eat fish/meat in the evening but We don't eat fry food* (A mother of basic level education aged 26). Similarly. another mother added that *dal bhat and sabji are daily food items. In the evening, we eat dal, bhat, tarkari and meat almost every day. We like fry food, even I am a gallstone patient* (A mother of basic level education aged 32).

In the same way, next mother introduced her meal patterns and she said we are Gurung, we eat meat or egg most of the time. In the evening, we eat curry and dhido/roti/aato/rice. If pulses remain from morning, we eat pulses

too. My son doesn't like rice too much (A mother of basic level education aged 29).

In the contrary another mother said *we eat roti, pulses, curry and rice in the evening. Normally, we do not eat fry food and meat or fish* (A mother of secondary level education aged 27).

The above quotes demonstrated that, mothers with basic to secondary education often described dinners consisting of rice, pulses, curry, and occasional meat or fish, with variable cravings for fried food. Cultural background and health status influenced food choices, e.g., preference for meat in Gurung families and some avoiding fry food. Regarding the food preparation trends, simple home-cooked meals with little to no oil and spices have been the standard in this community. Fishes or meats that are occasionally fried or prepared. They purchase premade / readymade food from the market if they have no time. They eat fruit includes bananas and apples, when available.

Discussion

This study depicted a largely balanced dietary regimen led by cultural sentiments, economic constraints, and growing health awareness. While *dal-bhat-tarkari* remains the staple, diversity comes through fruits, milk, and occasional pieces of meat. Most importantly, mothers showed sensitiveness towards health-oriented food customs restricting fried foods and salt consumption in households with hypertensive episodes or gallstones. Similar to our finding it is found in Nepal's Karnali Mountains that children's diets were dominated by staple foods like rice and pulses with low dietary diversity and limited fruit/vegetable consumption, highlighting how socioeconomic factors shape food choices (Shrestha & Khanal, 2025). Similarly, in support of this behavior, a study found that eating disorders are the primary cause of gallbladder and duct stone formation and one of the most important factors in maximizing body mass index and effectively preventing the development of gallbladder and bile duct stones is eating habits (Zyuzin et al., 2023).

In this study, maternal educational level appeared to influence food variety but not overall food quality, as even illiterate mothers provided home-cooked meals while limiting unhealthy options. Consistent with our findings, Ravikumar et al. (2022) reported that parental education plays a key role in shaping children's nutritional habits; however, these effects may be limited if poverty-related health inequalities and access to affordable, nutritious foods are not addressed, since children remain highly dependent on parental guidance and support.

According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, children's dietary behavior, including food choices and healthy lifestyle choices, is influenced by a combination of

environmental, cognitive, and behavioral factors. Self-efficacy is linked to children's eating habits, including an increase in their confidence to make more better (Rolling & Hong, 2016). Moreover, Social Cognitive Theory and theoretical model of nutritional status focused on children's eating behaviors as determined by interactions across mothers, family members, community, and sociocultural status (Bandura, 1986; Sims et al., 1972).

In our study, the mothers stressed the importance of lunch as a priority area of supplying nutrients to the child's mind and general health. To support this quotation, a study found that the lunch offered significant advantages which had significant and favorable benefits on children's height and educational attainment (Lundborg et al., 2022).

This study revealed the cultural background influences food choices. Aligned with these findings, a study claimed that the foods that people choose to eat, the environment in which they eat, and the people they spend time with all influence the shared values, beliefs, and attitudes of any group of people and may vary depending on the situation, often reflecting local social customs that provide meaning to day-to-day life. (Jayasinghe et al., 2025).

It is reasonable to suppose that parents' eating choices and habits have an impact on their children's eating habits. An individual especially mothers in Nepali context often has primary responsibility for choosing which foods to serve in the family. A variety of factors influence the choice of food, and economic and availability considerations play a significant role in determining what is consumed, however a range of social, psychological, physiological, and biological factors also affect personal food preferences (Bandura, 1986; Sims et al., 1972). All of these appear to have an impact on personal food preferences, which are crucial in understanding intracultural theory of differences in dietary choices (Hursti, 1999).

While this study provides some valuable insights, it's crucial to acknowledge a few limitations. For starters, it only gathered viewpoints from mothers, which means fathers, grandparents, and childcare providers, who also influence children's eating habits—were left out. Plus, relying heavily on self-reported data can introduce social desirability bias, especially when it comes to discussing unhealthy foods or nutritional knowledge.

The study also didn't take into account seasonal variations in food availability, which can influence meal choices. Lastly, incorporating methods like dietary recall or observational techniques could have strengthened and validated the findings, even though the study claims to have reached saturation. This research highlights the importance of considering maternal perspectives and the caregiving environment.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of mothers to influence and regulate the daily eating habits of children in the Rupandehi district of Nepal. Mothers' food-related decisions are influenced by a complex interplay of cultural customs, home resources, time availability, and perceptions of children's preferences and health needs. The continuance of traditional meals like dal-bhat-tarkari illustrates strong cultural continuity and practical flexibility, while variations in breakfast and dinner demonstrate how ethnic background and changing lifestyles impact daily dining habits. Mothers demonstrated a strong commitment to feeding their children healthy, home-cooked meals despite challenges such as a lack of formal education and budgetary constraints. These findings suggest that improving child nutrition should begin with parental values, knowledge, and life experiences. Therefore, nutrition policies and initiatives should be mother-centered, culturally aware, and sensitive to local food circumstances, recognizing women as crucial change agents in promoting healthy eating among young children in addition to their role as caretakers.

Abbreviations of Nepali food items to English equivalent

Bhat: Steamed rice; *Sanji/tarkari*: Vegetable curry / Cooked vegetables; *Dal*: Pulse; *Puri*: Deep-fried wheat bread; *Kera*: Banana; *Roti*: Flatbread; *Haluwa*: Sweet pudding / semolina dessert; *Dhido*: Thick porridge usually prepared from millet or buckwheat); *Aato*: Coarsely milled flour, typically made of corn and wheat; *Dry Samosa*: Fried triangular pastry; *Paratha*: Layered flatbread; *Bhuja*: Puffed rice.

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Author Contributions

Prakash Sharma: Conceptualization and data collection, performed the analysis, project administration, software, validation, visualization, writing- original draft, writing- review and editing.

Jitendra Kumar Singh: Conceptualization, formal analysis, resources, information visualization, writing - review and editing.

Bishnu Kumar Adhikari: Conceptualization, perform the analysis, project administration, software, validation, visualization, writing- review and editing.

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