

## Empowering Women as Agents of Change in reducing Stunting in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

Stunting, which is a serious public health problem, has long-term impacts on children's growth and development. Women's empowerment is identified as a strategic key in overcoming the root causes of stunting, including limited access to nutrition, education and health services. Therefore, this research aims to explore the role of women's empowerment as agents of change in efforts to reduce stunting rates in Indonesia. This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. The research results confirm that women's empowerment has a crucial role in reducing stunting in Indonesia. Through education, women are empowered to provide optimal nutritional care and monitoring for children, while economic empowerment increases family access to nutritious food and reduces the risk of stunting. Empowered women also serve as agents of outreach and advocacy, raising awareness in communities and bringing about changes in societal norms and practices related to child care. Women's active participation in health and food programs, such as nutrition empowerment programs, strengthens their understanding of nutritional needs and strategies for overcoming the problem of stunting at the household level. Overall, women's empowerment not only has an impact on women themselves, but also brings positive changes to the welfare of families and society at large, supporting efforts to reduce stunting rates in Indonesia.

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## INTRODUCTION

Stunting, as a health problem that is a national priority, is the main focus in achieving the Indonesian government's sustainable development targets. The seriousness of this problem is reflected in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 2.2, which sets the goal of eliminating all forms of malnutrition, including stunting, by 2030 (Munthe, 2022). In response to this challenge, the Indonesian government has set an ambitious target to reduce the prevalence of stunting to 14% by 2024. Data from the 2022 Indonesian Nutrition Status Survey (SSGI) shows positive signs, with the incidence of stunting having decreased to 21.6% (SSGI, 2023). Despite improvements in stunting prevention efforts, challenges remain enormous, and the government is scheduling further efforts to achieve

its ambitious target, namely reducing stunting prevalence to 17% by 2023 (Handayani, 2023).

Stunting, as a complex health problem, requires a comprehensive multisectoral approach, considering that its causes are varied and involve direct and indirect factors (Laili & Andriani, 2019). Although nutritional deficits, especially in mothers and children, can be identified as the main cause, this problem is also closely related to socio-cultural, economic, political and gender equality factors. Socio-cultural aspects, such as traditional beliefs and practices related to diet, as well as societal norms surrounding women's roles in the family, can influence the availability and accessibility of adequate nutrition (Astuti, 2018).

In an economic context, inequality in the distribution of resources and access to quality health services also contributes to the problem of stunting (Munawaroh et al, 2020). In addition, political factors including health policies and budget allocations are important elements that influence the effectiveness of stunting prevention efforts. Furthermore, gender equality also plays a key role, both in access to resources and in making decisions that affect family welfare (Afyati & Siswati, 2021).

Achieving the target of reducing stunting rates marks a historic milestone in improving the quality of children's health in Indonesia (Martony, 2023). The government's ongoing efforts to reduce the prevalence of stunting reflect a genuine commitment to the welfare of future generations. Stunting, as a complex and multidimensional health problem, requires a holistic approach involving various elements of Indonesian society (Harjanti et al, 2023). In this context, it is important for all components of society, including the private sector, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations and the general public, to take an active role and contribute according to their respective expertise (Juniar et al, 2022).

The collective role of all levels of society can include increasing access to nutrition education, promoting healthy eating patterns, and developing women's empowerment programs (Shendri, 2023). Involving the private sector in providing resources and financial support, as well as collaborating with non-government organizations in developing innovative programs, can be a significant step in supporting government efforts (Khumayah & Hardjowikarto, 2020). By mobilizing the potential and expertise of various parties, Indonesia can accelerate stunting reduction, ensure optimal health for future generations, and achieve overall sustainable development goals (Zuhroidah et al, 2022). Top of Form

Women's empowerment has been recognized as an effective strategy in overcoming the stunting problem in Indonesia (Khumayah et al, 2023). This approach not only provides direct benefits to women themselves, but also creates broad positive impacts in families and communities (Masithoh et al, 2022). An economically empowered woman not only has greater access to resources, education and health services, but is also able to provide better financial support for her family, especially children (Fitri et al, 2023).

Women who are economically empowered can act as agents of change in reducing stunting. By having better economic capabilities, women can increase their family's access to nutritious food, adequate health care and educational facilities (Chandra et al, 2021). Additionally, women who actively participate in economic activities have the potential to

change family norms and practices related to diet and child care. Thus, women's empowerment is not only individual but also acts as a catalyst for broader social transformation (Haris, 2014).

In the context of reducing stunting, women's empowerment interventions require collaboration between sectors, including health, education and the economy. Involving women in decision making and providing support for the development of economic skills can be a strategic step in creating an environment that supports optimal growth and development of children (Yuliana & Hakim, 2019). Thus, women's empowerment is not only a solution to reducing stunting, but also a long-term investment in building a more balanced, fair and sustainable society (Darmansyah & Ariska, 2021).

The aim of this research is to deepen knowledge about the role of women's empowerment as agents of change in efforts to reduce stunting rates in Indonesia. Through deeper understanding, this research aims to make a real contribution to more sustainable and holistic health policy planning. The benefits of this research include identifying success factors and obstacles in implementing women's empowerment programs, which is expected to provide practical guidance for policy makers, non-governmental organizations and the general public to increase the effectiveness of efforts to reduce stunting. By detailing the positive impacts of women's empowerment, this research is also hoped to motivate more support and participation in creating an environment that supports the welfare of women and children, as well as supporting the achievement of Indonesia's sustainable development targets.

## METHOD

This research has qualitative descriptive characteristics with the main aim of uncovering and describing phenomena, events, facts and circumstances that occurred during the research, with the aim of presenting true reality (Yulianah, 2022). In this research, the data used comes from secondary literature, including journals, previous research, scientific articles, and other sources of information. The data analysis approach follows the framework proposed by Miles and Huberman as outlined by Gunawan (2022), which includes data collection, data reduction, data presentation, as well as drawing conclusions and data verification. The data analysis process begins with collecting data from various sources, then continues with the data reduction stage. Data reduction involves filtering and summarizing data to identify key points relevant to the research. The reduced data provides a more focused and clear picture. Next, the data is presented and organized based on the previous process to facilitate understanding of research findings. Finally, this research can summarize the results and verify the findings produced, ensuring that the interpretations and conclusions drawn are in accordance with the existing data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Women empowerment

Tutik Sulistyowati (2015) in her journal quoted from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment (Kemen PP) states that women's empowerment is an effort to enable women to gain access and control over resources, economic, political, social, cultural, so that women can organize themselves and increase their sense of trust. to be able to play a role and participate actively in solving problems, so as to build abilities and self-concept. Siti Kodariyah (2015) in a study entitled "Segregation and Women's Poverty in a Glimmer of Light towards Women's Welfare". Suggests that the indicators of success in women's empowerment are marked by the following 3 indicators:

- a. Output indicators are characterized by the implementation of women's empowerment.
- b. The income indicator is characterized by women who have been empowered and are able to try to support the economy according to their skills.
- c. Impact indicators are characterized by empowered women who are able to live a decent life, are able to develop businesses, organize or join society and form other women to develop their skills.

There are two characteristics of women's empowerment. First of all, women's empowerment characterizes an emancipatory spirit that encourages the involvement of the entire community in the development process. This reflects recognition of the importance of gender equality and improving the status of women as an integral part of sustainable development. Through understanding and accepting women's rights, society is expected to overcome patriarchal norms and provide active support for women to participate in various aspects of life, including social and economic development.

Furthermore, women's empowerment can also be seen as an active process in which individuals or communities are involved in collective enlightenment, awareness and organizing efforts. This involves an inclusive approach, enabling women and society generally to understand their rights, build capacity, and be involved in decision-making. This process creates an environment that supports personal growth and more active participation in the overall development of society. Thus, women's empowerment is not only an end goal, but also a continuous journey towards increasing prosperity and equality in a community.

Empowering women is one strategic way to increase women's potential and increase the role of women in both the public and domestic domains. This can be done by: First, dismantling the myth about women as complements in the household is an important step to raise public awareness of women's greater role and potential. In the past, the view that women were sidekicks to their husbands, or friends who only stood behind their husbands, reflected gender stereotypes that limited women's freedom and initiative. Apart from that, the expression "swarga nunut Hell Katut" gives the image that women appear to be passive and tied to their fate which is completely dependent on their husbands, without having control over their own lives.

This view creates inequality and reinforces traditional and restrictive gender roles. By digging deeper and rejecting these myths, society can understand that women have great potential to develop, contribute and take a more active role in various areas of life. Understanding that women are not mere adjuncts, but individuals with unique rights, skills and potential, is key to creating a more just and equal society. Through the process of understanding and rejecting these myths, women can be more independent and have control over their lives, and be proactively involved in building a more inclusive and equal society.

Second, providing various skills to women has a significant impact in freeing them from dependence on a fate that is completely dependent on men. Through skills training, especially in areas such as sewing, embroidery, and entrepreneurial skills such as making batik cloth and various types of food, women can develop their independent abilities. Sewing and embroidery skills, for example, not only provide the ability to create clothes with your own hands, but also open up opportunities to get involved in the creative industry and set up a small business.

In addition, entrepreneurship training in making batik cloth and various types of food gives women the opportunity to become independent entrepreneurs and achieve economic success. By having these skills, women can not only provide for their families more efficiently, but also build a sustainable source of income. This not only creates financial independence, but also increases their self-confidence and knowledge, enabling them to actively participate in the economic and social development of their communities. By empowering women through various skills, society can see the role of women as agents of change who can make various positive contributions to more inclusive and sustainable development.

Third, providing the widest possible opportunities for women to attend or pursue education is an essential step in ensuring their equality and independence. Preparing girls through education not only opens doors to knowledge, but also provides skills, perspective, and a deep understanding of the world around them. By providing the widest possible access to education, women have equal opportunities with men to develop their potential, pursue career aspirations, and contribute to the progress of society. Education empowers women with the tools to achieve independence, break the cycle of poverty, and become agents of change in their communities. Wide access to education also helps fight gender stereotypes and social norms that limit women's roles. Through education, women can explore their talents, design a vision for the future, and pursue careers without being constrained by gender boundaries.

Furthermore, equality in education has a positive impact on the entire society, because educated women tend to have greater influence in making family decisions, pay attention to children's health and education, and participate actively in community development. Therefore, providing the widest possible educational opportunities for women is not only an investment in individuals, but also an investment in a more inclusive and sustainable future.

## The Role of Women's Empowerment in Reducing Stunting in Indonesia

Women's empowerment plays a key role in efforts to reduce stunting in the following ways:

### a) Increasing Access to Education and Health Information

Empowering women through education opens up their access to in-depth knowledge about nutrition and proper health practices. With this improved understanding, women can become key agents in providing optimal health care and nutritional monitoring for their children. Education provides a strong foundation for identifying children's special nutritional needs and understanding the importance of nutrition at their stage of development. Women who are empowered through education are also more likely to be able to access the latest health information and best practices that can be implemented in the family's daily routine.

Furthermore, a good understanding of stunting prevention practices gained through education gives women the tools to change norms in the family and community. They can integrate this knowledge into daily eating patterns, promote nutritious food intake, and practice health behaviors that support children's optimal growth. Thus, empowering women through education not only provides direct benefits to women themselves, but also leads to positive changes in children's health and the potential to reduce stunting rates in society as a whole. By integrating nutritional knowledge into everyday life, women can become important pillars in efforts to prevent stunting and create a healthier and more resilient generation.

### b) Active Role in Family Decision Making

Empowered women bring positive changes in the dynamics of family decision making, especially related to aspects of children's health and nutrition. This empowerment gives them a stronger voice in determining policies and practices that support family well-being. By having the ability to voice these needs and policies, women can make a meaningful contribution to a decision-making process that is more holistic and focuses on family health.

In addition, women who have an active role in decision making tend to influence the family's food and lifestyle choices towards healthier patterns. They can promote the consumption of nutritious food, ensure continued stunting prevention, and practice healthy daily living behaviors. Women's empowerment not only has a positive impact on individuals, but also extends this positive influence to the entire family, creating an environment that supports children's growth and development well. By understanding and fighting for the health interests of their families, empowered women become critical agents of change in designing a healthier and more empowered future for their families.

### c) Economic Skills Development

Women's economic empowerment opens the door to family access to better resources, especially nutritious food. By having economic skills, women can actively participate in economic activities and increase the family's purchasing power. This ability allows them to support the purchase of nutritious food that can meet the family's nutritional needs. In addition, through economic contributions, women can help ensure

diversity in the family's diet, thereby strengthening the nutritional intake necessary for children's growth and development.

Furthermore, women's economic empowerment can be an effective strategy to reduce the risk of stunting at the family level. By increasing women's income, families can more easily access quality health and nutrition services. Financial support from women can be used to purchase nutritious food, meet children's nutritional needs, and provide better access to essential health care. Therefore, women's economic empowerment not only provides benefits at the individual level, but also has a positive impact on the welfare of the family as a whole, helps reduce stunting rates, and creates conditions that support children's optimal growth and development.

d) Counseling and Advocacy in the Community:

Empowered women become effective extension agents in advancing awareness of the importance of children's nutrition and health in their communities. With the knowledge they gain through empowerment, these women can convey accurate and relevant information about good nutrition practices and child care to fellow community members. Their role as extension agents is key in shaping community attitudes and behavior regarding children's health, providing a strong basis for implementing positive changes in family diets and lifestyles.

More than that, empowered women also act as advocates in changing the norms and practices of the surrounding community regarding child care. They are able to defend children's rights to optimal growth and development and emphasize the importance of preventing stunting. By promoting changes in the fabric of society, such as supporting the provision of nutritious food and fighting for equal access to children's health services, women are empowered to not only create change at the individual and family level, but also at the broader community level. By becoming agents of outreach and advocacy, empowered women become a major force in guiding communities towards a better understanding of the importance of child nutrition and health to ensure a brighter and healthier future for future generations.

e) Participation in Health and Food Programs

Women's active participation in health and food programs, especially nutrition empowerment programs, makes a major contribution to increasing their understanding of nutritional needs and how to overcome the problem of stunting at the household level. Through this program, women gain access to in-depth information about the importance of good nutritional intake for children's growth and development. They are also involved in educational activities that help raise awareness of the impact of poor nutritional practices on children's health.

Participation in nutrition empowerment programs provides women with practical skills that they can apply in their daily lives. They learn how to prepare nutritious foods, identify good sources of nutrition, and understand nutritional needs at different stages of a child's growth. With this increased knowledge and skills, women are empowered to

become agents of change at the household level, leading initiatives to ensure children receive adequate nutrition for optimal growth and development.

## CONCLUSION

Women's empowerment has an integral role in efforts to reduce stunting rates in Indonesia. Empowering women through education provides a better knowledge base regarding nutrition and health practices, enabling women to provide optimal nutritional care and monitoring for their children. Women's economic empowerment through developing economic skills not only increases family access to nutritious food but also reduces the risk of stunting by providing financial support for health and nutrition services. In addition, empowered women act as agents of outreach and advocacy, raising awareness in communities about the importance of children's nutrition and health and contributing to changes in societal norms and practices related to child care. Women's active participation in health and food programs, such as nutrition empowerment programs, strengthens their understanding of nutritional needs and strategies for overcoming the problem of stunting at the household level. Overall, the research results show that women's empowerment not only changes the lives of individual women, but also has a positive impact on the welfare of families and the community at large. Women's empowerment is a holistic approach that involves educational, economic and social aspects to create positive change in an effort to reduce stunting in Indonesia. By involving women as agents of change, it can be hoped that there will be sustainable steps towards a healthier and more empowered society.

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