The Role of Fasting in Children Among Orthodox Christian Communities

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Content Outline

1. Introduction
2. Objectives
3. Results and discussion
4. Conclusions and recommendations
Introduction: Why study Fasting in Amhara?

- Agriculturally productive region

- Highest stunting rate (52% in Amhara vs. 44% nationally, EDHS 2011)

- A&T secondary analysis of data from EDHS 2011 showed that Orthodox Christian families’ children 50% less likely to consume animal source foods
Only 10% of young children in Amhara received ASF compared to 14% nationally (EDHS 2011)

More than 85% of Amharans are Orthodox Christians

Around 180 Ethiopian Orthodox calendar days are fasting per year

Little research on relationships between religious fasting and child feeding
Study objectives

- Identify barriers and facilitators to ASFs on most days including fasting days
- Identify the specific small doable actions that families and local priests could undertake
- Assess the willingness of church leaders and priests to participate in this endeavor and how to deliver guidance to local priests
Methodology
**Study area and setting**

**Amhara region**

- North Achefer and Mecha woredas (districts) of West Gojjam zone were purposively selected.

- Two kebeles per woreda.
Data collection and analysis

Data collection tools

- Pre-tested, recorded & transcribed
- Analyzed using thematic approach

Two-phase data collection

- First phase of data collection took place during long Lenten fasting period
- Full-day observations by trained data collectors
Study Participants

**Phase 1, Mothers:**
- 8 HH observation
- 32 in-depth interviews and trials of improved practices (TIPs)

**Phase 2, Key informants:**
- HEWs
- HDAs
- Church leaders
- Local church priests
Results and Discussion
Identified Barriers to Feeding ASF During Fasting

**Mothers reported:**

- Children under two years were not currently fasting
- But they received their first meal at **10:30 AM or noon later**
- And **none was fed animal source foods**

**Reported reasons:**

- Fear of utensil contamination, perceived threats to mother’s fast, mothers don’t cook separately for children
Mothers’ willingness

• After brief counseling on the importance of ASF and encouragement to try giving ASF during the next week (fasting period):
  – Almost all mothers were willing to try giving some animal source food to their child during the week-long trials of improved practices
  – A few mothers added egg and milk to their child’s porridge and cooked separately
Some mothers complained that their child did not like the taste of the new food.

But others said that adding eggs and milk to the child’s food left them more satisfied.

“My child is crying less and plays more, giving me more time to do my chores.”
Mothers face year-round barriers to giving young children ASF

Most mothers, and some HEWs and HDAs:

- believe a child cannot chew and swallow meat safely
- or
- even digest it properly until around two years of age
Church leaders and priests cleared up misconceptions

Priests said that:

- Merely smelling butter and other ASFs does not interfere with fasting
- Cooking utensils and hands could be washed with soap and cleaned up
- Church could—and should—play a role in improving child feeding
None of local clergy had offered their congregations advice on feeding ASFs during fasting

When asked, they said they were willing to promote eggs and milk on fasting days
Frontline health workers confirmed what mothers said

- Most HDA volunteers said they were not convinced that ASF (especially meats) could be started at 6-8 months and should be delayed until one year.

- Some of the HEWs and HDAs said they were reluctant to feed their own ASF on fasting days and were hesitant to counsel mothers to do so.
Conclusions and Recommendations
Church leaders and frontline workers could:

- Offer explicit guidance on feeding during fasting
- Promote preparing enriched foods for infants and young children
- Promote the most readily accepted ASFs: eggs, milk, and some milk products
Nutrition program:

- Strongly promote the need to feed children ASF every day focusing on mothers, fathers, HDAs, HEWs, priests, and church leaders

- Engage all of these groups in promoting recommended feeding practices

- Address both ASF consumption barriers (fasting & non-fasting)
Thank you