

Household decision-making around food in rural Tajikistan

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Abstract

This study was conducted to research and develop recommendations for gender transformative approaches that will address food myths, perceptions of healthy eating, and increasing dietary diversity within rural Khatlon Province, Tajikistan. Seventy-five percent of the population in Tajikistan live in rural areas and spend most of their income on food. While stunting in children under five has decreased the number of acute malnutrition and underweight has increased. This study is a qualitative, cross sectional study that involved secondary data analysis, key informant interviews (KI), and focus groups discussions (FGD) to gauge appropriate interventions. In February of 2017, data was collected in the form of four KIIs and fifteen FGDs that were stratified by mothers with young children, mothers-in-law, and males, across 12 different villages. Analysis of the KIIs and FGDs included NVivo software for coding and to uncover the most salient themes and characteristics from each. The participants of this study reported several misconceptions and taboos surrounding certain foods, especially during pregnancy and food practices for children under the age of five. Results also indicated a household hierarchy of decision-making surrounding food that included who buys, cooks, and decides what to buy. The findings of this study will be used as a springboard to launch gender-responsive and nutrition-sensitive interventions through the local agricultural extension agents.

Background

Tajikistan is a landlocked, low-income, food-deficient country that is the poorest of the five Central Asian republics. While there has been improvement in GDP, the main focus of development partners has been the agricultural sector, which employs almost half of the population and accounts for 26 percent of the GDP.

Seventy-five percent of the population in Tajikistan live in rural areas and spend most of their income on food. Immediate causes of undernutrition are inadequate dietary intake and disease, driven by inadequate access to food, inadequate care provided to children, and insufficient health and environmental services. This is also perpetuated by gender inequality, underrepresentation of girls within education, and government resource allocations that are unfavorable to the poor.

Tajikistan also has one of the lowest rates of access to clean water, with 42 percent of households lacking access. Poor sanitation and hygiene are major contributors to increase diarrheal diseases and undernutrition in children.

Objectives

The aim of this project is to research and develop recommendations for gender transformative approaches that will address food myths, perceptions of healthy eating, and increasing dietary diversity.

Objectives include:

- To identify and understand ways to engage men and mothers-in-law in household nutrition through extension services
- To investigate practices within households around dietary habits and food behavior
- To refine qualitative instruments and methods for future research on a larger scale

Methods

University of Florida researchers recruited Masters of Public Health students and Tajikistan Agrarian University students for fieldwork and training. UF collaborated with local Tajik partners, Tajikistan Agriculture and Water Activity (TAWA) and Tajikistan Health and Nutrition Activity (THNA), to carry out this project. Both partners are funded through USAID and support Feed the Future activities.

Key Informant Interviews:

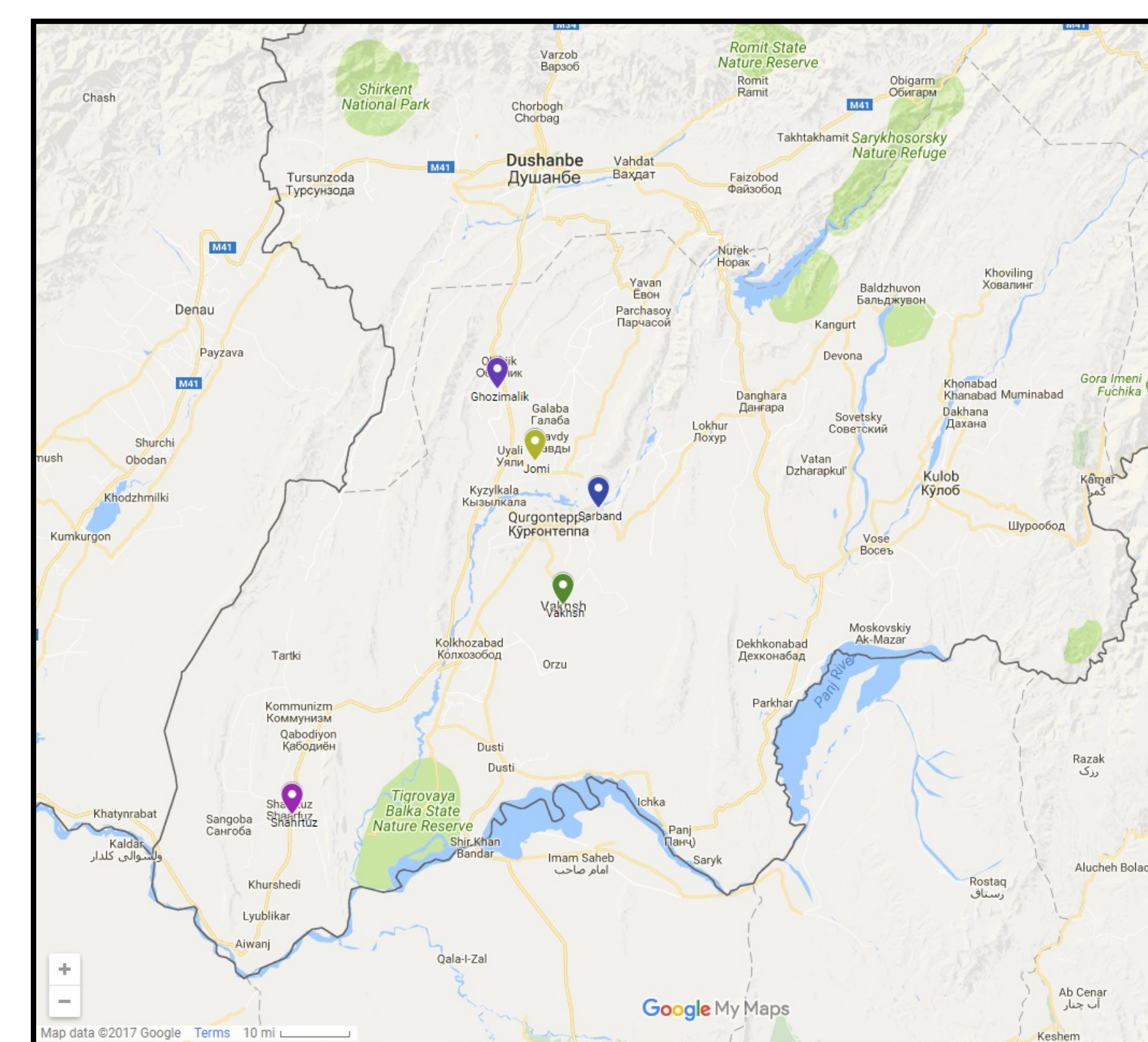
- Conducted in the respondent's native language (English or Tajik)
- Semi-structured, open ended questions focusing on perceptions of household nutrition and decision-making surrounding food within the rural villages of Khatlon.
- A total of 4 key informant interviews were conducted.

Focus Group Discussions:

- Focus groups were purposefully stratified by role in the household: in-married women, mothers-in-law, and males (usually older)
- Focus groups were asked a number of questions regarding decision-making surrounding food and dietary behavior
- A total of 15 FGDs took place, however, 2 were excluded from analysis as a results of being mixed (in-married women and mothers-in-law)



- Researchers carried out the qualitative analysis using the grounded theory and the constant comparative method
- Themes and sub-themes were collected from the data deductively and inductively in that certain themes were created a priori whereas others, and most sub-themes, were identified upon review
- Analytics were also done using the QSR International's NVivo 11 software

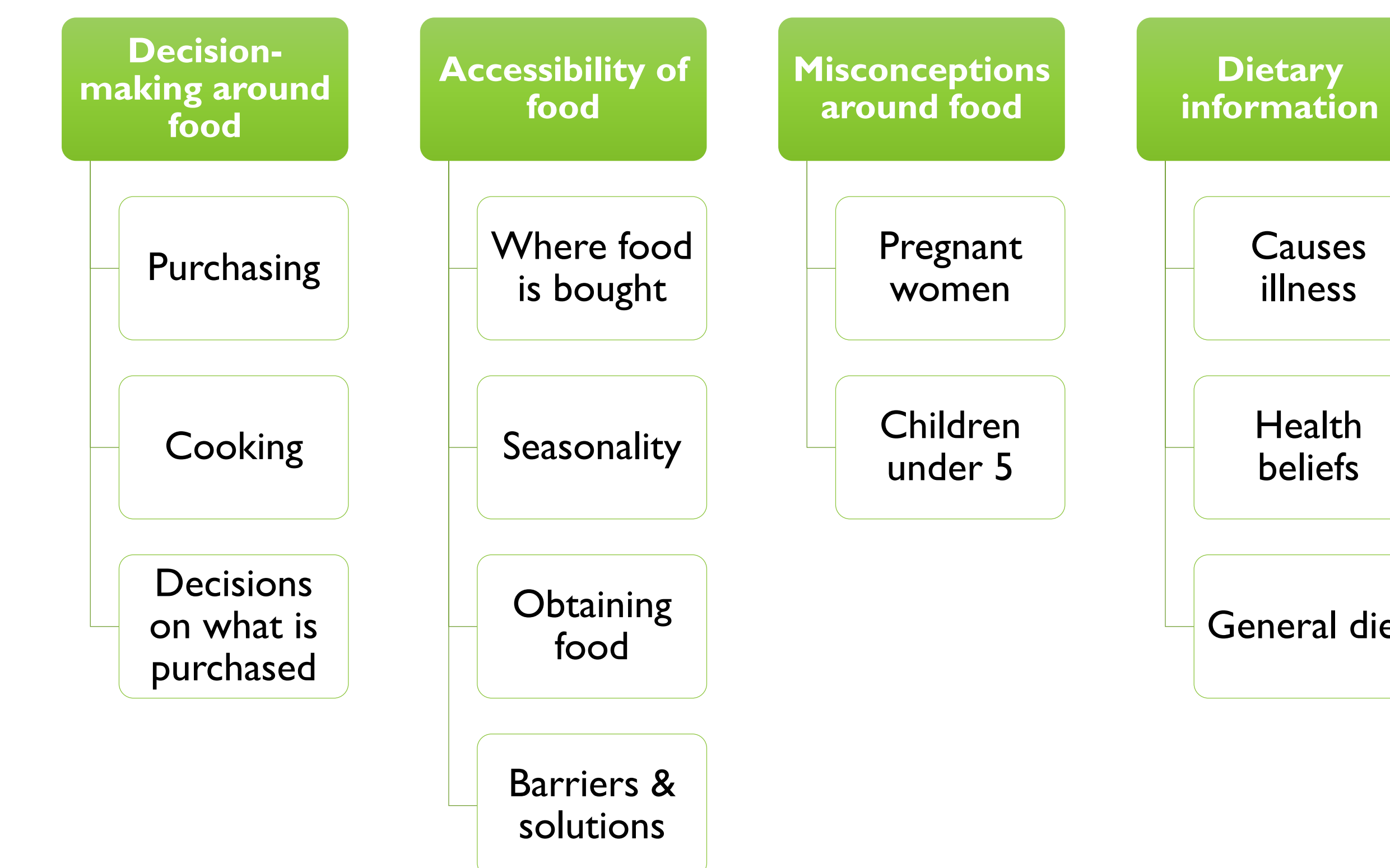


Focus Group Discussion locations

- Khuroson/Ghozimalik
- Jomi
- Sarband
- Shahrtuz
- Vakhsh

Results

The results of the focus group discussions have been analyzed and presented below according to the following major themes and sub-themes:



- There were a total of 106 participants across 13 focus group discussions within five districts (see map) of Khatlon Province that were analyzed (two were excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria)
- Many women participants placed additional emphasis on consuming a healthy diet during pregnancy to prevent macrosomia – which appeared to be a common threat
- As a result of male migration, women (both in-married women and mothers-in-law) are experiencing more agency within the household
- Common diets included high carb meals that often did not include fruits
- Young mothers were often found to supplement breast milk within the first 6 months of child birth with

Conclusions

- Due to the small sample size of this study, several limitations need to be considered such as the small male representation due to male-out migration, villages were chosen based off the local partner's agents, and participant responses varied based on education and proximity to food centers (local or district markets)
- Extension services should attempt to incorporate mothers-in-law into trainings and educational interventions, as they are often the ones with a significant amount of power and time within a household
- This study demonstrates the need for gender-responsive solutions using agricultural extension agents to counter barriers to a healthy diet and dietary diversity in Khatlon Province.
- Further investigation may also prove useful in assessing if there exists an effect of village proximity to District Markets on food access.