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Socio-cultural factors and nursing ethical dilemma affect stunting in Indonesian children

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Abstract

Background: Stunting is a body condition that occurs due to chronic malnutrition due to the lack of fulfillment of nutritional needs over a long period of time. In Indonesia, it is estimated that almost less than 20% of children are stunted.

Purpose: to outline the socio-cultural factors and ethical dilemmas of nursing that contribute to stunting in children in Indonesia.

Method: To achieve this goal, the author conducted a systematic review of quantitative research articles that addressed the topic. Article searches were conducted through Google Scholar and ScienceDirect using keywords such as "social," "cultural," "ethical," "stunting," "child," and "Indonesian." Relevant articles, published within the last five years (2020-2025), and available in Indonesian and English, are then selected based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria that have been set. Search results resulted in ten articles that met the criteria.

Results: From the ten articles, eight main themes were found that became socio-cultural factors and ethical dilemmas of nursing related to stunting in children in Indonesia. These themes are based on the results of the journal analysis: nutritional intake of pregnant women, exclusive breastfeeding, complementary breastfeeding (MPASI), community attitudes towards stunting, childcare patterns, environmental cleanliness, as well as economic and educational aspects of parents.

Conclusion: Through this systematic review, this study succeeded in revealing how complex socio-cultural factors are interrelated and contribute to the occurrence of stunting in children in Indonesia. These factors include the nutritional adequacy of the mother during pregnancy, the success of exclusive breastfeeding, complementary feeding practices, public views on stunting, the parenting methods applied, the quality of environmental sanitation, as well as the economic conditions and education level of parents.

Keywords: Children; Ethics; Indonesia; Socio-Cultural; Stunting.

INTRODUCTION

Stunting remains a serious nutritional problem faced by Indonesia, and even globally (Werdaningtyas & Mahmudiono, 2024). Stunting is a condition characterized by impaired growth and development in children, characterized by height or length that is not in accordance with age standards (Haryani, Astuti, & Sari, 2021).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the global stunting rate in 2020 was 22.3%, or approximately 148 million children under five (World Health Organization, 2025). One region with a high stunting rate is Southeast Asia, according to data released by UNICEF in 2022, with a stunting rate of

26.4% (World Health Organization, 2023). Indonesia, with a stunting rate of 31%, ranked second after Timor-Leste, the country with the highest stunting rate in Southeast Asia in 2022 (Asian Development Bank, 2022). The Indonesian Health Survey reported that Indonesia has a very high stunting rate, with a prevalence of 21.6% in 2022 and a decline to 21.5% in 2023 (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). This stunting rate still requires attention as it remains above the World Health Organization (WHO) standard of 20% (Islami, Amelia, Kawuryan, Mardiyani, & Rahmawati, 2025).

The Indonesian government has made improving the quality of human resources (HR) a national priority in its Medium-Term Development Plan. Reducing the prevalence of stunting is one of the government's main goals, in line with the vision of Indonesia Emas 2045. Creating a healthy and productive future generation is also a key foundation for development. Anthropometric measurements are used to determine stunting in children, which is an important indicator of nutritional adequacy. These measurements are differentiated based on the child's age: length is measured for children under two years old, while height is used for children aged two years and older. This measurement method is crucial in providing an accurate picture of a child's growth and development status and detecting potential nutritional problems early (Ginting & Hadi, 2023).

A child's health status is strongly influenced by the family, particularly through parenting patterns that meet nutritional needs. Furthermore, poor child health, malnutrition, and stunting can stem from factors occurring from pregnancy to childbirth. Low socioeconomic status is a risk factor for increased disease transmission and malnutrition, especially in densely populated areas. Lack of education impacts knowledge, resulting in a lack of initiative in health awareness and disease prevention capabilities. In Indonesia, stunting occurs due to several factors, both direct factors such as maternal nutritional status, breastfeeding practices, complementary feeding (PMT), and exposure to infection, and indirect factors including education, food systems, health services, availability of clean water and sanitation, and lack of supporting motivation. Therefore, this study will review previous studies on various socio-cultural factors that contribute to the incidence of stunting in children in Indonesia, including maternal nutritional intake, exclusive breastfeeding for toddlers, complementary feeding (children aged 6 months), parental attitudes towards stunting, parenting patterns for children, environmental cleanliness, and aspects of economic income.

We all recognize that Indonesia is blessed with an extraordinary wealth of cultural diversity, reflected not only in its diverse customs and traditions but also in its societal attitudes and perspectives on health. One factor influencing health status, including family nutritional needs, is not solely assessed through a medical approach; social systems, such as socio-cultural systems, play a crucial role in childcare practices and feeding practices to meet nutritional needs. Local traditions and parenting patterns, often passed down

through generations, and parents' understanding of children's health can also shape behaviors that do not always align with modern health standards. The role of custom is not only seen as an inherent entity within a community but also manifests as rules that local communities believe govern their residents. The existence of custom in a region serves as a guideline for community life, particularly in maintaining the safety and health of its residents (Ermianti, Ardianti, Azizatunnisa, & Sihemran, 2024).

From the various differences in cultural backgrounds in Indonesia, it is one of the factors that cause ethical dilemmas for nurses in making decisions about actions. Several ethical principles that are used as guidelines in nursing, such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, provide a framework that can help nurses evaluate existing options and determine the most appropriate action (Goddard, Hunegnaw, Luu, Haneuse, Zeleke, Mohammed, & Chan, 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a systematic review approach by applying the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method. The PRISMA method consists of five main stages: (1) determining the literature topic, (2) searching for literature sources, (3) selecting relevant sources, (4) grouping and analyzing data, and (5) compiling a summary of findings. The literature search process was carried out through several leading search engines, namely Google Scholar and ScienceDirect. The next stage is article screening. This screening includes an evaluation based on the main title, abstract, research publications, and the research methodology used. After that, the article stages were carried out based on inclusion and exclusion criteria that had been carefully and optimally concluded. The inclusion criteria used in this study are as follows: 1). The type of research in this study is quantitative with the use of primary data. 2). Articles containing research results regarding socio-cultural factors and nursing ethical dilemmas that influence the incidence of stunting in Indonesian children. 3). Research was analyzed from several journals/articles published in the last five years (2020-2025). 4). The research sample was toddlers (aged under 5 years). 5). The article text is available in both Indonesian and English. Conversely, articles will not be included in the review if they meet the exclusion criteria, namely: first, the article is in the form of a report, essay,

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dissertation, or review article. two, the type of qualitative research, and three, research published before 2020.

In this research article, we reviewed quantitative research articles published between 2021 and 2025. Ten selected articles were then included in a meta-analysis. Of these ten articles, the majority (eight) used a cross-sectional study approach, while the remaining two were also quantitative studies. Data collection methods used in these articles included questionnaires and interviews. The authors then synthesized the findings from these ten

quantitative research articles. This synthesis highlighted eight main themes closely related to sociocultural factors: maternal nutritional intake, exclusive breastfeeding, complementary feeding, community attitudes toward stunting, childcare patterns, environmental hygiene, and economic and educational aspects of parents. Further details regarding each selected article are presented in the accompanying table.

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RESEARCH RESULT

Table 1. Analysis of Articles on Stunting in Children 2021-2025

(Author, Year) Country	Purpose	Method	Final Results
(Hasmyati et al., 2025) (Indonesia)	to investigate the influence of socioeconomic factors, culture, environmental sanitation, and physical conditions of the home on the prevalence of stunting.	Explanatory research using a cross-sectional approach. The population in this study consisted of 150 toddlers suffering from stunting. Data analysis was performed inferentially using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method, and the analysis was reinforced with the Smart-PLS analysis program.	The results of the analysis show that socioeconomic, cultural, environmental sanitation, and physical housing conditions are significantly associated with stunting. These factors also contribute to the spread of infectious diseases, which ultimately affect children's nutritional status. Infectious diseases have a complex relationship with stunting, where the interaction between the two can worsen children's conditions. These findings also have implications for stunting prevention strategies and the design of holistic and integrated health policies.
(Udayana et al., 2022) (Indonesia)	to determine the influence of local culture on pregnant women on the incidence of stunting.	This study used an observational method with a case-control design. The sampling technique was simple random sampling with mothers under-five aged 24-59 months as respondents at Candi Rejo Health Center, Central Lampung Regency with a total of	The largest age group for toddlers is 24-35 months, and the biological mother's age ranges from 20-38 years. Chi-square statistical test, the effect of maternal dietary restrictions during pregnancy on the incidence of stunting at Candi Rejo Health

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		114 respondents. The independent variables of the study were the behaviour of maternal dietary restrictions during pregnancy and the beliefs of the mother's cultural practices during pregnancy on the incidence of stunting.	Center, Lampung Regency, Odd Ratio 72.25. The chi-square statistical test showed that the behaviour of carrying out maternal cultural beliefs and practices during pregnancy on the incidence of stunting at the Candi Rejo Health Center, Lampung Regency with an Odds Ratio of 88,400. Pregnant women who abstain from eating fish are believed by the public that milk will smell fishy.
(Rosida et al., 2023) (Indonesia)	To determine the effect of food culture patterns on the incidence of stunting.	A historical cohort and observational design with a case-control approach. The subjects of this study were cases of stunting.	Cultural eating patterns greatly influence the incidence of stunting, as evidenced by the Wald statistical test p-value < 0.05, while external variables (mother's age, education, birth spacing, and parity) do not influence the incidence of stunting, as evidenced by the Wald statistical test p-value > 0.05. The most significant influence on the above research variables is food restrictions on mothers during pregnancy, which can be proven by EXP (B) = 139.6. Thus, food restrictions on mothers during pregnancy influence the incidence of stunting by a factor of 139.6.
(Aziz, 2025) (Indonesia)	to analyze the effect of maternal education on the incidence of stunting.	A descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through in-depth	Maternal education had a significant effect on their understanding of the causes and

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		interviews and observations of mothers who have toddlers in several areas in South Sulawesi. The research subjects consisted of mothers with various levels of education, who were selected purposively. The data obtained were analyzed thematically to explore the relationship between maternal education levels and their knowledge and attitudes towards stunting prevention.	ways to prevent stunting. Mothers with higher levels of education have broader knowledge about the importance of balanced nutrition, exclusive breastfeeding, and proper child health care. In contrast, mothers with lower education tend to have limited knowledge, which is often influenced by social norms in the community around them. Other social factors, such as family economic status and support from the community, also shape mothers' mindsets and behaviors in managing child health.
(Nazara et al., 2025) (Indonesia)	To identify the characteristics of factors causing stunting among.	This research employed a qualitative method with an ethnographic design. The techniques used include observation, interviews, and documentation.	The study found four factors: failure to utilize healthcare services, food taboos during pregnancy, lack of knowledge about maternal nutrition, and limited family income to meet the child's needs.
(Ahmad et al., 2024) (Indonesia)	To analyze the relationship between socio-cultural factors and the incidence of stunting among toddlers.	quantitative with a cross sectional method. The population is all toddlers in Oben village. The total sample in this study was 34 toddlers aged 24-59 months with a purposive sampling technique.	The results of the analysis using the Chi-Square test show that there is a relationship between family support and the incidence of stunting in toddlers aged 24-59 months and there is no relationship between socio-cultural, food beliefs and child care with the incidence of stunting in toddlers aged 24-59 months. 59 months.

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(Astuti et al., 2024) (Indonesia)	To analyze traditional feeding practices and stunting in children aged 6 to 59 months.	This cross-sectional study was conducted in Karanganyar District, Central Java Province. Data from a total of 706 children aged 6 to 59 months (352 children with stunting and 354 children without stunting) were obtained from the medical records of 10 primary health care units (PHCUs) in 9 subdistricts. Descriptive analysis and binary logistic regression (BLR) were performed to explore the association between the dependent (stunting) and independent variables.	The BLR results from children 6 to 59 months indicated that children of mothers with food restrictions during pregnancy (AOR = 5.87, 95% CI: 3.03, 11.38), children with prelacteal feeding (AOR = 4.27, 95% CI: 2.16, 8.41) and children with food restrictions (AOR = 7.74, 95% CI: 1.22, 49.16) were more likely to experience stunting. Those from children 6 to 23 months revealed that food restrictions during pregnancy (AOR = 17.55, 95% CI: 2.86, 107.80) and prelacteal feeding (AOR = 10.58, 95% CI: 2.06, 54.41) were related to stunting.
(Janah et al., 2023) (Indonesia)	To determine the relationship between maternal attitudes, family support, and socio-cultural factors with early complementary feeding for infants	Quantitative research with descriptive analytical research and using a cross-sectional design, where the research was conducted at the time of data collection between independent variables and dependent variables, which were conducted simultaneously at the same time. The sample in this study consisted of 58 respondents. Validity tests were conducted, and all instruments used were valid.	There is a relationship between mothers' attitudes and early complementary feeding in infants in Cicadas Village, Bogor Regency, in 2022, with a P-value of 0.025 and an OR value of 4.000. There is also a relationship between family support and early complementary feeding in infants in Cicadas Village, Bogor Regency, in 2022, with a P-value of -value of 0.001 and an OR value of 8.867, there is a relationship between socio-cultural factors and early complementary feeding in infants in Cicadas Village, Bogor Regency in 2022 with a P-value of 0.009 and an OR value of 5.078.

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(Akbar et al., 2022) (Indonesia)	To analyze socioeconomic factors associated with stunting in children aged 6-59 months.	Analytical observational study using a case-control study design. The study population consisted of all children aged 6-59 months in Kotamobagu City, totaling 7,604 children. The sample size for each case group was 49 children and for the control group was 98 children. Thus, the total sample size was 147 toddlers. The sampling technique used was simple random sampling. Data analysis was performed using the chi-square test.	There is a relationship between the mother's level of education ($p=0.030$; $OR=2.296$) and family income ($p=0.044$; $OR=2.602$) and the incidence of stunting in children aged 6-59 months in Kotamobagu City. It is recommended that parents with toddlers meet their children's nutritional needs by utilizing local foods and increasing their knowledge about nutritional intake in order to prevent stunting in children.
(Andari et al., 2024) (Indonesia)	to analyze the incidence of stunting factors in toddlers based on Transcultural Nursing.	This study used a quantitative design with a cross-sectional approach. The population in this study was all mothers who had toddlers, samples were taken by simple random sampling technique. The collected data were analyzed univariately and bivariately.	Results: There was an association between the incidence of stunting in toddlers with technology variables ($p= 0.045$), family and social support factors ($p= 0.048$), cultural and lifestyle values ($p= 0.013$), and economic factors ($p= 0.034$).

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DISCUSSION

Based on selected journals summarizing research conducted in Indonesia, the findings of each study were analyzed and summarized into 10 main topics, including nutritional intake in pregnant women, exclusive breastfeeding for toddlers, complementary feeding for toddlers, parental attitudes toward stunting, parenting patterns, environmental hygiene or sanitation, economics, and education. The distribution of these topics within each article is discussed in detail in the discussion below.

The first topic of discussion focuses on the nutritional intake of pregnant women. The diversity of ethnicities and cultures in Indonesia gives rise to unique practices and preferences in food choices, often based on local beliefs and beliefs. These practices can impact the nutritional status of pregnant women and potentially contribute to stunting. Research conducted at the Lotu Community Health Center in North Nias Regency showed that mothers' behavior in implementing dietary restrictions during pregnancy based on their beliefs contributes to stunting. In North Nias, foods generally prohibited for pregnant women include scaly fish, certain fruits such as twin bananas and pineapples, and vegetables such as ginger leaves. Activities such as going out at night and attending funerals are also restricted. The main reason behind these taboos is the belief that certain foods or activities can negatively impact the pregnancy and the health of the unborn baby. For example, pineapple is believed to cause uterine inflammation and lead to miscarriage. However, in theory, pineapple is a rich source of vitamin C, vitamin A, vitamin B6, folic acid, iron, magnesium, potassium, and various other minerals essential for pregnant women. Similarly, pregnant women who avoid black sticky rice are believed to experience back pain. Theoretically, black sticky rice is a source of relatively high carbohydrates with low fat content and fiber, which is good for digestion. The prohibition against scaly fish is based on the local belief that the breast milk of mothers who consume it will have a fishy odor. However, in theory, fish is a potential source of protein, even superior to other animal proteins, and contains omega fatty acids and important minerals such as calcium, phosphorus, and iron. Finally, the prohibition on consuming salted fish arises from the belief that it can cause the baby's skin to become itchy at birth. In theory, salted fish does contain nutrients such as fat, iron, and iodine, but excessive consumption is still not recommended. (Nazara & Wahyu, 2025).

Research conducted in Tunoe Village, Miomaffo Tumur District, Kefi Tribe, specifically the Kefi Tribe, found that the food generally given to children aged 6-24 months consists of two food groups: carbohydrates and vegetables. Side dishes are optional if available at the household level. Foods served include porridge mixed with moringa (kelor), and eggs, if available. Foods prohibited by the tribe or tradition include red foods and animal protein sources such as fish. According to interviews, they cannot eat red foods such as fish or onions; anything red is believed to be a sign of good fortune, and they also respect tradition. Research conducted in Karanganyar Regency, Central Java Province, found that food prohibitions stem from cultural beliefs that red meat can cause high blood pressure, thus triggering miscarriage or bleeding during childbirth. Prelacteal feeding involves applying honey or sugar to the baby's lips, believing that applying something sweet will bring good luck to the baby in the future. Rice water is given to babies because it is believed that its white color and thick texture have benefits similar to breast milk. Drinking milk during pregnancy can cause stomach upset and nausea, and can cause the baby to be "born dirty and smelly." Squid tentacles can trap the baby and cause complications during labor. There are also beliefs that seafood can alter the taste and odor of breast milk, and mothers limit the intake of eggs because they believe they can cause allergies (Astuti et al., 2024).

The second theme examines the issue of exclusive breastfeeding, considering the influence of culture and community beliefs. The Indonesian government, through Law Number 17 of 2023 concerning Health, Article 303 paragraph (1) letter d, emphasizes the obligation not to prevent mothers from exclusively breastfeeding their babies for six months. This is in line with the right of every baby guaranteed in Article 288 paragraph (1) to receive exclusive breastfeeding according to their needs. Breast milk is considered the most important biological nutrition after birth. Breast milk is the most ideal natural source of nutrition for babies from birth, containing carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals, and antibodies that are crucial for building the baby's immune system and supporting optimal growth and development. More than just nutrition, the breastfeeding process also strengthens the emotional bond between mother and baby. The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF consistently recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a baby's life, without additional food or drink. A

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study conducted in the Menawai Health Center, Yapen Islands Regency, found a strong correlation between exclusive breastfeeding and stunting prevention. The study showed that children who were not exclusively breastfed had a much higher proportion of stunting compared to children who were exclusively breastfed. Non-compliance with exclusive breastfeeding recommendations has been shown to significantly increase the risk of stunting in toddlers. These findings reaffirm the vital role of exclusive breastfeeding in providing adequate nutrition for infant growth and development, particularly in preventing chronic malnutrition, which is the root cause of stunting (Harahap, 2024).

Research conducted in Cicades Village, Bogor Regency, revealed a significant relationship between cultural factors and the practice of providing complementary foods to children. Some people there have the perception that the provision of early is driven by several factors, including: (1) fussy children, (2) working mothers, and (3) the strong influence of ancestral traditions. The practice of providing additional food before the time is considered common and has become a hereditary habit in the family (Janah, Rini, & Jayatmi, 2023). Another study conducted in Oben Village, Nekamese District, Kupang Regency, identified that several mothers with toddlers had actually provided complementary foods before the baby reached 6 months of age. After interviews, it was revealed that these mothers had an understanding that providing before the age of 6 months could have a negative impact on the baby's growth. However, in practice, the mother's work as a farmer which limits breastfeeding time encourages the adoption of alternative solutions in the form of providing formula milk. In fact, it is known that optimally providing complementary foods before the age of 6 months can cause the baby's digestive system to be unable to digest food properly. As a result, the baby becomes susceptible to disease due to a lack of adequate nutritional intake. Consequently, toddlers who frequently experience infectious diseases will experience stunted growth and cannot achieve optimal growth and development (Nazara & Wahyu, 2025).

The fourth theme, attitude, is a crucial factor that can influence behavior. Attitude can be defined as a person's positive or negative evaluation of a particular object, person, or concept. For example, a mother's positive attitude toward an action reflects her awareness and acceptance of the importance of stunting prevention, or

vice versa (Khoirunnisa, Kisnawaty, & Firmansyah, 2025). This study was conducted in the Doda Community Health Center in Poso Regency. Childcare practices were based on traditional beliefs. For example, there is a belief that disposable diapers should not be used because they are believed to cause swollen feet. There is also the practice of placing charcoal on the forehead or pinning medicine as a form of protection for children when going out at night to ward off evil spirits. These practices demonstrate that spiritual and symbolic dimensions remain integral to child rearing, although they are not universal and not shared by all families (Tange, Adam, & Alim, 2025).

An unclean environment, combined with limited access to clean water, poor sanitation, or high density, are crucial factors that significantly contribute to stunting. Poor sanitation and limited availability of clean water create an environment vulnerable to the spread of infectious diseases. These diseases, especially in children, can hinder the absorption of essential nutrients, ultimately impacting their physical growth and cognitive development, increasing the risk of stunting. Research findings in Sengkerang Village, Central Lombok, indicate that unhealthy environmental conditions are a major challenge. Uncontrolled waste disposal into rivers, drains, and rice fields creates ideal habitats for mosquitoes and flies. This situation is exacerbated by the proximity of septic tanks to dug wells, increasing the risk of water contamination. Environments with inadequate sanitation, including a lack of access to clean toilets and safe drinking water, directly contribute to increased cases of infection and diarrhea. Prolonged diarrhea can inhibit the absorption of essential nutrients and negatively impact children's growth and development.

The seventh theme, Socioeconomics, plays a crucial role as a determinant of stunting in children. Low family income often results in limited access to nutritious food, adequate health services, and proper sanitation and clean water. Research in Kotamobagu City shows that a family's economic situation significantly influences the risk of stunting in children. Families with low incomes are more likely to have stunted children than families with sufficient or higher incomes. Many heads of families there work as farmers managing other people's land or as pedicab drivers, whose income is uncertain each month. As a result, many families struggle to meet their daily needs, including purchasing nutritious food. Family income is very important for purchasing healthy food.

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CONCLUSION

This study concludes that stunting in Indonesia is a complex issue influenced by various interrelated sociocultural factors. Key aspects focused on in this analysis include: maternal nutritional intake, exclusive breastfeeding practices, complementary feeding (MPASI), community perceptions of stunting, parenting patterns, environmental hygiene, and parents' economic conditions and education levels.

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