

The Impact of Parental Death on Schooling and Subjective Well-being

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YOUNG LIVES RESEARCH SUMMARY • WORKING PAPER 44

February 2009

Parental death and orphanhood is a substantial risk faced by children in Ethiopia, especially due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the risk of associated, opportunistic infections such as tuberculosis. Clearly, this can lead to significant negative impacts on a child's short- and long-term welfare. This paper looks at the effects parental death can have on children in middle childhood between ages 7 and 12 in the short and medium term in Ethiopia. It focuses on children's educational outcomes (school enrolment, ability to read and write, and mathematical achievement) and on child subjective well-being, broadly defined as a child's own evaluation of his or her life.

Methodology

The data comes from two rounds of the Young Lives survey, conducted in 2002 and 2006, of an initial sample of 1000 children across 20 sentinel sites in Ethiopia. The children were 7 to 8 years of age in 2002 and 11 to 12 years of age in 2006. A little over 10 per cent had already lost a parent before the first round was undertaken. Of those who had both parents during Round 1, around 10 per cent lost one or both prior to Round 2. Thus by the time the children reached 12 years of age, one in five had lost one or both parents.

Findings

The analysis finds that the loss of the mother and the loss of the father affect children very differently. Maternal death impacts most upon educational attainment. School enrolment at age 12 is reduced by around 20 per cent, whilst drop-out rates are significantly high at around 11 per cent. It also increases the probability of a child being unable to write by around 21 per cent, and being unable to read, or to read only letters rather than words or sentences, by around 27 per cent.

Maternal orphans are less likely to consider education important, with only 9 per cent believing that it will contribute to an improved quality of life. A major factor leading to this perception may be the fact that the majority of children who lose their mother experience a change in caregiver who, in 42 per cent of cases, is not an immediate relative. These caregivers are found to have fewer education-oriented aspirations for the orphans in their care, stating that their ideal level of formal schooling is an average of seven years, which is significantly lower than the 12 years expected by parents and by caregivers who are close relatives. They also expect their charges to marry and have children at a significantly earlier age.

None of these impacts upon educational outcomes are found among those children who have lost a father. They are unlikely to experience the disruptions in living arrangements felt by maternal orphans, with 89 per cent continuing with the mother as the main caregiver. However, loss of the father has significant impacts in terms of subjective well-being, with paternal orphans' sense of optimism reduced by 0.7 on a scale of one to nine. This may be related to associated changes in economic circumstances: children are now in poorer households, have to work significantly more, and may feel they have fewer assets available to them. However, paternal orphans also feel that they are treated with more fairness and respect than had their father not died.

Policy implications

These findings have far-reaching implications for policy formation. In particular, they highlight the need for maternal orphans to be targeted with non-transferable subsidies to encourage school attendance and education.

