

The problems faced by AIDS orphans

Emotional impact

Children whose parents are living with HIV often experience many negative changes in their lives and can start to suffer neglect, including emotional neglect, long before they are orphaned. Eventually, they suffer the death of their parent(s) and the emotional trauma that results. They may then have to adjust to a new situation, with little or no support, and may suffer exploitation and abuse.

In one study carried out in rural Uganda, high levels of psychological distress were found in children who had been orphaned by AIDS. Anxiety, depression and anger were more found to be more common among AIDS orphans than other children. 12% of AIDS orphans affirmed that they wished they were dead, compared to 3% of other children interviewed.

These psychological problems can become more severe if a child is forced to separate from their siblings upon becoming orphaned. In some regions this occurs regularly: a survey in Zambia showed that 56% of orphaned children no longer lived with all of their siblings.

Household impact

The loss of a parent to AIDS can have serious consequences for a child's access to basic necessities such as shelter, food, clothing, health and education. Orphans are more likely than non-orphans to live in large, female-headed households where more people are dependent on fewer income earners. This lack of income puts extra pressure on AIDS orphans to contribute financially to the household, in some cases driving them to the streets to work, beg or seek food.

The majorities of children who have lost a parent continue to live in the care of a surviving parent or family member, but often have to take on the responsibility of doing the housework, looking after siblings and caring for ill or dying parent(s). Children who have lost one parent to AIDS are often at risk of losing the other parent as well, since HIV may have been transmitted between the couple through sex.

Education

Children orphaned by AIDS may miss out on school enrolment, have their schooling interrupted or perform poorly in school as a result of their situation. Expenses such as school fees and school uniforms present major barriers, since many orphans' caregivers cannot afford these costs. Extended families sometimes see school fees as a major factor in deciding not to take on additional children orphaned by AIDS.

AIDS orphans may also leave school to attend to ill family members, work or to look after young siblings. Even before the death of a parent, children may miss out on educational opportunities; research in Kenya suggests that children of HIV-positive parents are significantly less likely to attend school than other children. Outside of school, AIDS orphans may also miss out on valuable life-skills and practical knowledge that would have been

passed on to them by their parents. Without this knowledge and a basic school education, children may be more likely to face social, economic and health problems as they grow up.

Stigmatization

Children grieving for dying or dead parents are often stigmatized by society through association with AIDS. The distress and social isolation experienced by these children, both before and after the death of their parent(s), is strongly exacerbated by the shame, fear, and rejection that often surrounds people affected by HIV and AIDS. Because of this stigma, children may be denied access to schooling and health care. Once a parent dies children may also be denied their inheritance and property. Often children who have lost their parents to AIDS are assumed to be HIV positive themselves, adding to the likelihood that they will face discrimination and damaging their future prospects. In this situation children may also be denied access to healthcare that they need. Sometimes this occurs because it is assumed that they are infected with HIV and their illnesses are untreatable.

PNAC Resource Centre

Noman Farooq
Senior program Associate
PAKISTAN NATIONAL AIDS CONSORTIUM
House No 441, Street 57, Sector I 8/3 Islamabad

Email: noman@pnac.net.pk

www.pnac.net.pk
www.aidspnac.org