

Representations of Orphaned Children's Lives in Lesotho

Susan E. Short
Brown University, USA
Susan_Short@Brown.edu

Maletela Tuoane
Department of Social Development, South Africa
Maletela.Tuoane@socdev.gov.za

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Southern Africa is transforming the social institution of the family. One feature of this transformation is the illness and death of middle-aged adults, those most likely to provide for the well-being of children. In Lesotho, one out of every five children under 15 has lost one or both parents. By 2010, estimates suggest that this figure will be 25%, the highest of any country in the world (Children on the Brink 2004 UNICEF, USAID). Significantly, this high and growing incidence of orphan hood is occurring in one of the poorest countries in Southern Africa. This paper draws on survey data and ethnographic data to describe the situation of orphaned children in Lesotho.

Two sources of data are featured in the analysis. The first is a series of over 100 in-depth interviews conducted with young children (7-14) and primary caregivers of young children (0 -14) in two village locations in rural Lesotho during nine months of fieldwork in 2003 and 2004. The two locations included a central rural village location off the main road, and a set of small associated villages accessible only by a two hour walk. All interviews focused on the family situation of children and included detailed questions on living arrangements and child well-being. The interviews were designed to include significant variation by living arrangements (including fosterage), socioeconomic situation, and age and sex of a set of focal children.

The caregiver interviews included discussion of the reasons children do not live with parents, as well as reasons for change in child living arrangements. The interviews also included two vignettes which depicted orphaned children. Detail on the mobility of children and change in living arrangements were collected with child residence histories.

The child interviews made use of auto-driven interview techniques to encourage children to represent their own lives and living arrangements. Children described photos that they took with single-use cameras of the people and places that were important to them. The interviews included discussion of the resources (emotional, physical, and other) available to children and the sources of these resources both within and beyond the household. They also included an elaboration of children's social connections within and beyond the community. We use these child interviews, together with the caregiver interviews, to portray the lives and living arrangements of all children, and to focus on those of fostered and orphaned children.

The second source of data is the 2001 Lesotho Demographic Survey (LDS). The LDS data, collected by the Lesotho Bureau of Statistics, are nationally representative and include over 28,000 children less than fifteen years old. We use these data to describe the living arrangements of maternal, paternal, and double orphans, comparing them to the living arrangements of other children. In addition, we examine differences in household wealth, education, and other circumstances for orphaned and non-orphaned children. Care is taken in the analysis to distinguish between children who do not live with parents, but whose parents are alive, and children who are orphaned. The LDS data help to contextualize the analysis of the ethnographic data and provide an alternate representation of children's lives.

This research provides an unusual opportunity to use both ethnographic and survey data to elucidate and contextualize the situation of orphaned and vulnerable children in a setting with one of the highest incidences of HIV/AIDS. The two sources of data yield distinct, yet complementary, representations of orphaned children's lives. The survey data provide the first nationally representative portrayal of children's living arrangements, including orphaned children's living arrangements, in this setting. The ethnographic data help to detail the mechanisms leading to observed living arrangement patterns. Significantly, they provide a window into the mobility of children, an aspect of children's lives often missed with cross-sectional data. They also provide insight into the distribution of resources, and the reasons fostered, and particularly orphaned, children can be disadvantaged.

A significant contribution of this work is its practical relevance. A better understanding of orphaned children's lives promises to provide a backdrop for policymakers who will need to address the situation of the growing number of orphaned and vulnerable children in southern Africa.