

Research Brief 9: Prevalence and impact of parental separation on psychosocial wellbeing among vulnerable rural Zambian children*

This is no 10 of a series of briefs providing new insights on the wellbeing of rural children in Sub-Saharan Africa, a previously much under-researched population. Findings are derived from a longitudinal (2008-2010) controlled study in 5 communities of Kafue District, Zambia. This study was aimed at evaluating and developing a results-based intervention programme focussed on the interface between psychosocial wellbeing and livelihood. In addition, the study identified particular risk and protective factors for the psychosocial wellbeing of vulnerable children.

In the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa, intervention programmes and research largely focus on orphans as they are thought to be the most vulnerable. Mental health challenges are more common and more severe in orphans compared to all non-orphans (see Research Brief 2). However, this study highlights that non-orphans who are separated from living parents experience levels of mental ill-health. Interventions programmes should therefore focus on not only on orphans but also on other children who are separated from one or both of their parents.

Research Questions

1. What are the main reasons that children live separately from one or both of their parents?
2. How many children are permanently separated from their parents?
3. Do orphans and children who live apart from surviving parents differ in their psychosocial wellbeing?

Research Methodology

- Based on the last round of data collection in 2010 (719 participants).
- Interviews with standardised and culturally adapted psychometric measures of wellbeing.
- Included orphans, children living separated from their parents and children living together with their parents (12-20 years).

Key Findings

1. Main reasons for parental separation

Five main types of parental separation are identified as follows:

- Separated from one parent
- Separated from both parents
- Single orphans living with remaining parent
- Single orphan separated from living parent
- Double orphan

In addition, there are different measures of separation from a living parent:

- **Temporary separation:** Short-term separation whereby parent(s) are still considered to be a household member and play a significant role in the child's life.
 - **Permanent separation** (with or without maintained relationship): Separation between children and parent(s) with no intent or possibility of reversal.
- 2. Prevalence of permanent separation: Two thirds of rural children are living separated from at least one parent**
- 69.5% of the children in the study were separated from at least one parent (orphans or permanently separated). The national data reports that more than half of the children in this age range were separated from at least one parent. This difference is likely to be due to the intentional oversampling of orphans in the study.
 - In this study, prevalence of permanent separation from fathers and mothers differs (Figure 1): 59.9% of the separated but alive mothers still played a significant role in the child's life, while this was the case for only 34.5% of the permanently separated fathers.

* In this study, participants were aged 12-20

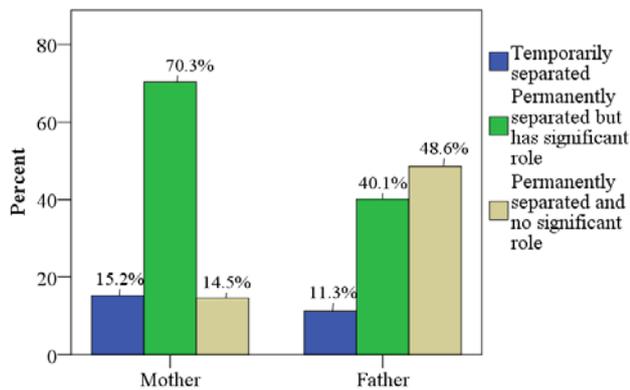


Figure 1: Gender differences in parental separation status and the role parents play in children's lives following separation

3. Children who are separated from their parents experience similar increased risk of mental ill-health challenges as orphans. Only permanent parental separation is considered in the comparisons below:

Mental Health:

Children who are separated from either one or both of their parents are at greater risk of higher depression levels than children living with both parents (Figure 2).

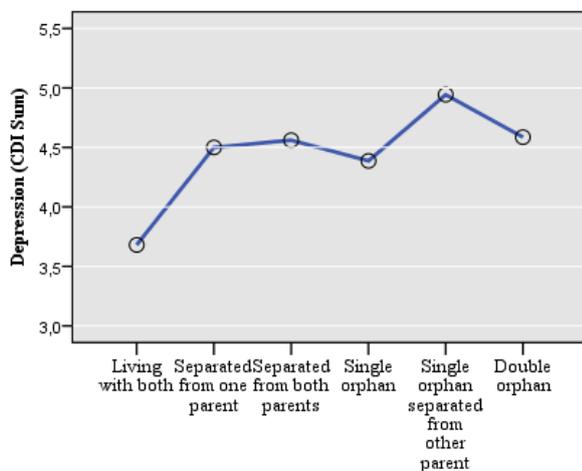


Figure 2: Depression levels are equally high for children permanently living separately from their parent(s) as they are for orphans

Quality of care:

Children who are separated from their parents report **lower levels of support from their primary caregiver**, when compared to children living with both of their parents. This is found for double orphans, single orphans and those who are separated from either one or both of their living parents. Only children living with both parents reported better outcomes. Double orphans and single who are separated from their surviving parent **feel more**

discriminated against at home, and less report less access to household resources than children living with both parents.

Social Support:

Double orphans and single orphans who are separated from their surviving parent receive **less social support from their siblings, friends, and teachers.**

Conclusions

- It is common for rural Zambian children to be separated from their living parents. When compounded by the high prevalence of orphanhood, this phenomenon is responsible for large numbers of minors growing up with caregivers who are not their parents. As the negative consequences for psychosocial wellbeing are similar for orphans and non-orphans living separately from at least one parent, both categories of children should thus receive equal attention in intervention programmes.
- While extended family networks in rural Zambian communities are strong, our findings highlight that children living with caregivers who are not their parents report feeling less cared for than children who living with their parents. This is especially the case for children who are separated from both parents.
- Programmes focused on children's wellbeing should therefore sensitise caregivers on issues such as within-household discrimination between their biological children and the other children in their care.

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