When Solidarity Fails: Heterogeneous Effects on Children from Adult Deaths in Senegalese Households*

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Abstract

The consequences of orphanhood have been an important topic on the research agenda in recent years, particularly against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa. Previous literature has highlighted negative effects on children from prime-age adult deaths in the household. Some authors have however pointed out that the effects are small, possibly as a result of well-functioning coping mechanisms prevailing in the region. Furthermore, previous literature has not focused on the role of household living and budgetary arrangements. In this article, we investigate the links between deaths in the household and subsequent economic outcomes of children. Exploiting an unusually rich dataset from Senegal that permits us to precisely identify the main care giver of a given child in the household, we test whether impacts on children differ according to their relationship with the deceased. We find robust evidence that this is the case: deaths in the household are not associated with diminished school presence for those children who are not under the direct responsibility of the deceased. They however have a strong significant negative effect for those children who are. On the basis of our results, which include effects on child labor and fostering, we argue that in large and complex households, intra-household inequality in access to resources are an essential part of the story that may well lead to a heterogeneous absorption of shocks among family members. As such, there may be important limits to African informal safety nets.

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1 Introduction

The Western literature of the nineteenth century is full of novels in which orphans face a terrible destiny. Cosette in Victor Hugo’s famous novel *Les Misérables* is entrusted to an innkeeper and his wife, the Thénardiers, who abominably exploit her and treat her no better than a dog. Oliver Twist in Charles Dickens’ eponymous novel lives in a workhouse where he and other orphaned boys are forced to work and fed very little. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, following the death of her parents from typhus, lives with her aunt who dislikes her and treats her as a burden. And Charles Perrault’s famous fairy tale *Cinderella* tells the story of a young girl who has lost her mother and who is enslaved by her stepmother and her daughters. The western African oral tradition is also full of tales about children who lost their mother and who are abused by their step mother.