

AIDS not the downfall of African families

The media's message is clear: the AIDS epidemic will be the downfall of families in Africa. A new study by a University of Missouri-Columbia researcher calls that an overstatement. Her study shows that AIDS compounds the issue of poverty in households where poverty is already a prevailing issue, especially when a household loses its primary income earner to AIDS.

“We saw some households that had experienced an AIDS death functioning better than some households that had not experienced an AIDS death,” said Enid Schatz, assistant professor of occupational therapy and director of social science research in the MU School of Health Professions. “We were surprised to see that all the alarmist predictions in the popular media that AIDS will bring an imminent downfall to the African society just did not seem to be true. In fact, because of all the poverty issues, AIDS just seems to be viewed as ‘just another crisis’ to the families in South Africa.”

Schatz spent time with older women in multi-generational households in a rural part of northeast South Africa. The older generation's government pensions (one of few developing countries to offer this type of assistance) play a crucial role in day-to-day survival in this area where AIDS morbidity and mortality have profound effects on household resources. The study says the elderly are much more likely to be affected, rather than infected, with HIV/AIDS.

“Some of the older women did express that their situations seemed difficult and they expected to be spending these years of their lives resting. However, most often we heard that they feel it is their obligation and responsibility to carry the household financially with their pensions and despite the hardships, most are able to cope,” Schatz said.

Often, the offspring of the elderly in families either die of AIDS or have to migrate to find work because of the high unemployment rate in the rural areas. The households are then left to cope with the loss of income and support previously provided by those who become sick or die of AIDS. If parents migrate to find work, grandmothers must use their pensions, intended to sustain one elderly individual, to maintain an entire household and often even donate to other households. One elderly woman in the study and her husband support 12 people, including seven grandchildren, four of whom are AIDS orphans.

“In the Western perspective we often see households as being unconnected and that is not the case in South Africa,” Schatz said. “We saw families who were very resilient and really taking care of each other. In some cases, grandmothers were caring for their own grandchildren as well as orphans and caring for those sick and dying of AIDS.”

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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