

# HIV-positive parents in Zimbabwe struggle to manage their children's education, study finds

October 25 2023, by Tatenda Zinyemba

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Over the past three decades researchers have explored various aspects of the impact of the HIV pandemic. One focus area has been children who

have lost their parents to AIDS. Less attention has been given to children who are raised by parents living with HIV. This group has become much bigger as more people have [access to antiretroviral therapy](#) and are therefore expected to raise their children.

Our research in Zimbabwe looked at the effects the HIV status of parents had on their [children's education](#).

In Zimbabwe, the current HIV prevalence rate among adults is about [13%](#). In 1997 it was at its peak at [29.3%](#). Nevertheless, Zimbabwe still has the [sixth highest HIV rate](#) in the world. Eswatini has the highest rate (19.58%) and South Africa ranks fourth (14.75%).

Our research focused on [mothers](#) in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city, who had access to treatment. We were interested in the impact of HIV on their investment in their children's education. We conducted [interviews](#) at [Mashambanzou Care Trust](#), a local non-profit organization that provides care to about 5,000 HIV-positive low-income individuals in Harare. Thirteen HIV-positive mothers were interviewed to discuss the key reasons behind the disruption of their children's schooling .

We found that the HIV status of low-income parents in Zimbabwe severely affected their children's education, in four ways.

Firstly, HIV worsened the financial barriers parents faced when trying to get their children educated. Secondly, children missed school because they needed to take care of sick parents or siblings. Thirdly, sick parents were not involved with their children's [academic achievement](#) because they were physically, mentally and emotionally incapable of helping. Lastly, children of HIV-positive mothers did not always have birth certificates, a major barrier to school and exam registration in Zimbabwe.

## Financial barriers

The research showed that HIV in Zimbabwe is not only a health issue but also a socioeconomic problem that can force people into [poverty traps](#).

HIV-positive women expressed the view that the Zimbabwean economy, their partner's health and their own health affected how they supported their children's educational needs.

We found children with parents who could not afford to pay school fees or buy school uniforms could be sent home until the payments were made. Other [low income families](#) experienced this too but parents with HIV could not work and so had more difficulty paying school fees.

HIV-affected families could also face the burden of raising other children from deceased or ill family members. Some of the mothers had siblings and close family members who had died of AIDS. In one case, a [single HIV-positive mother](#) had three biological children and three orphans from relatives.

[Girls](#) were particularly affected because they were expected to care for siblings, help sick parents with [daily activities](#) such as eating and toileting, and make sure they had a place to live and food to eat.

Mothers spoke about the heavy burden their daughters had to [carry](#).

"My eldest child was the one who took care of me and cooked for me. When I got sick, my daughter stopped going to school. She is the one who took the responsibility of taking care of me."

Some children were forced to drop out of school to earn an income.

"He dropped out of school after finishing his Form 3. He is currently

selling bananas at Mbare and the money he is getting is not enough. Most of the time he brings home some food after selling bananas."

## **No time to help**

Most HIV-positive mothers told us that they did not [spend time](#) with their children because they spent a lot of time on income-generating activities, attending to their own health, or their husband's health. These tough conditions led to even more illness and stress.

"All my seven children stay at home as none of them is in school right now. Each day of their lives is difficult as in some cases we fail to get some food to eat. After having failed to get food for the family, it then stresses me more as the mother. Given my condition that I am HIV-positive I end up getting continuous headaches and sometimes I get sick as a result of the stress."

## **Birth certificates**

Some HIV-positive parents were too sick to obtain birth certificates for their [children](#). Without birth certificates, children risk being sent home and cannot benefit from programs that target poor children. One mother told of trying to get birth certificates for her children in Mutare, almost 300 kilometers away from Harare.

"I once went to Mutare to secure birth certificates for my children. I was told to bring my national identification card which was in Harare during that time. I am yet to go back to Mutare and collect birth certificates for my children. I am only being stopped from traveling because I am currently sick and receiving treatment."

## **Looking to the future**

Our research highlights a vulnerable group of children who should also benefit from social assistance programs that target HIV-affected orphans, given that their parents are too sick to care for them.

They should be included in the [National Orphan Care Policy](#), which seeks to provide basic care and protection to orphans and vulnerable children, and the [Basic Education Assistance Module](#), which pays school fees for this group of [children](#).

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