

Education, cooperative conflicts and child malnutrition—a gender-sensitive analysis of the determinants of wasting in Sudan

Lea Smidt, International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG)

Gender inequality in education is a strong predictor for child health deprivation across countries. Household-level studies seem to corroborate cross-national research: they find a link between mothers' education and child health outcomes. Yet authors disagree on whether education is a proxy for a woman's economic capacity, her abilities or her status. Further, previous studies disregard the fact that the effect of maternal education may depend on the level of paternal education. For example, a mother's level of education may only decrease her child's vulnerability if it is at least equal to her partner's education.

In a new study, Smidt (2019) investigates four possible channels through which maternal education may affect children's risk of wasting:

1. Mothers' knowledge on nutrition (ability and skills)
2. Mothers' status in the household (freedom of decision)
3. Mothers' socio-economic status (economic capacity)
4. Mothers' power relative to the father ('dominance' hypothesis).

Drawing on a sample of nearly 8,000 Sudanese children aged between 0 and 36 months, the study examines these pathways by means of a multivariate two-stage model. Sudan has one of the highest wasting rates globally, with 15.8 per cent of children being wasted in 2014. At the same time, the country ranked 139th out of 160 countries on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index in 2017, reflecting strong discrimination against women in the areas of politics, education and health. While Sudan is an extreme case, the study's findings have implications for comparable contexts characterised by extreme gender inequalities, political instability and conflict as well as authoritarian rule, such as Central African Republic, Chad and South Sudan.

The empirical analyses reveal that maternal education decreases the likelihood of wasting directly and via the quality of a child's

diet after controlling for household wealth and food security. By contrast, paternal education has no effect on a child's diet or nutritional status. Mothers' and fathers' relative levels of education do not influence their children's nutritional outcomes. This points to two possible transmission channels of maternal education:

- First, maternal education is associated with greater information and knowledge on the dietary needs of children (channel 1 confirmed).
- Second, independent from income and wealth, education raises a mother's status in the household. This positively affects her child, as she has greater access to resources and freedom to make decisions. The effect of a mother's status is independent from that of the child's father, suggesting that education is not associated with dominance but greater autonomy for mothers (channel 2 confirmed; channels 3 and 4 not confirmed).

Overall, mothers have a far greater impact on children's nutritional outcomes than fathers. This is most likely because they are the primary caregivers in nearly all households in Sudan. The findings suggest that policy interventions should focus on empowering women through capacity-building and material support, as well as by enhancing their legal and perceived status in society to ensure greater decision-making freedom. The transition from the authoritarian Al-Bashir regime to a civilian government in the aftermath of often women-led protests in 2018–2019 may open a window of opportunity for strengthening the role of women in decision-making processes at all levels of Sudanese society.

Reference:

Smidt, L. 2019. "Education, Cooperative Conflicts and Child Malnutrition—a Gender-Sensitive Analysis of the Determinants of Wasting in Sudan." *IPC-IG Working Paper*, No. 186. Brasília: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.