

VID-Colloquium

Survival of the Fitting? Maternal Preferences and Infant Mortality in Sub-Saharan Africa

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3:00 - 4:00 pm

This paper studies how being born at a parity or of a sex which is undesired by the mother relates to infant mortality in Sub-Saharan Africa, and how the differential mortality attributable to these preferences change across the demographic transition. With high rates of infant mortality in Sub-Saharan Africa, investments in infant and child health are subject to tough prioritisations of time and other resources within the household, in which maternal preferences may play a part. How these preferences will affect levels and gender differences in infant mortality as African women desire ever fewer children is still uncertain, as increased female empowerment and the difficulty in achieving a desired gender composition within a smaller family potentially pull in different directions. Assessing the preference-mortality relationship among the frontrunners of the fertility transition in Africa whose fertility desires are already low may shed some light on how sex and parity differences in infant mortality will develop in Africa in the future, and is relevant for designing policies aimed at addressing such differences.

Using data from 80 Demographic and Health Surveys, I find that being undesired according to the mother is associated with an excess of 8.5-14.5 infant deaths per 1000 births, which is not due to parity-invariant maternal factors or family composition. This result may, however, be influenced by parity-variant factors that are correlated with maternal preferences and mortality, as well as a tendency to adapt stated preferences to experienced fertility and family composition. I therefore apply a regression discontinuity design which accounts for variation in mortality between siblings that is continuous in relation to the preference set of the mother. Results suggest similar associations, and slightly larger differentials for children who are born in excess of both the mother's fertility desires and her preferred number of children of a given gender. Preferences can explain a larger share of infant mortality among mothers with lower fertility desires, and a larger share of female than male infant mortality for children of women whose fertility desire is between 1-3 children. Female education is associated with an initial increase in the role of preferences for infant survival and then a decline with the completion of secondary schooling, suggesting a similar transition as predicted by Bongaarts (2013) and Jayachandran (2014).

About the presenter

Martin Flatø is a PhD student in Demography at the University of Oslo. Currently, he is visiting IIASA on a scholarship from IIASA and the South African National Research Foundation. His research has focused on gender impacts of climate variation in Sub-Saharan Africa, including differential impacts on infant mortality and violence against women, and differential climate vulnerability of female-headed households in South Africa. Current projects consider the importance of maternal

preferences for infant mortality in Africa, and linking climate hazards with child welfare in Uganda. He holds an MPhil in Economics from the University of Oslo and an MRes in War Studies from King's College London, with work experience as school teacher and from the Norwegian diplomatic service. From August 2016 he will be working at NIFU, a Nordic education research institute based in Oslo.