

## STATUS OF WEST AFRICA'S FOSTERED CHILDREN

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### BACKGROUND

Social parenting represents an integral part of the lives of children in sub-Saharan Africa. It allows children, through extended familial networks, to access greater socioeconomic resources than nuclear families alone can provide. Child fostering, the practice where parents send their child to live with other households for extended periods is one of the ways families use external support to raise children. Families, typically those from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, make extensive use of this practice to give their children better life-course opportunities than they would have if they stayed with their parents. Fostering thus acts as an important social mobility mechanism for lower SES children who are fostered. High fertility and low SES origins, both factors are detrimental to child wellbeing, are the main reasons for child fostering (Ardayfio-Schandorf and Amissah 1995; Goody (1982). The consequences of child fostering for social stratification in sub-Saharan Africa is an important research area because this practice involves a significant proportion of children. In this region, the greatest barriers to education are financial constraints and access to schools, both problems that child fostering can help alleviate. Poor parents have the opportunity to foster a child to households who have greater socio-economic resources to invest in education. Those who live in communities without schools can also send their children to households living in areas with greater schooling access.

The purpose of this paper is to study the relationship between fostering and child welfare using grade progression, time use and disciplinary practices as measures of child welfare. These factors are related to different dimensions of schooling progress and performance and should provide insight into the quality and quantity of education that fostered children in Ghana receive. The potential for child fostering to reduce education and other inequalities between SES groups has not been adequately explored by social scientists and policy-makers. This is especially pertinent as educational inequality creates significant differences in important demographic outcomes such as health, fertility, and mortality. Not

only should fostering provide children with better living standards and greater educational opportunities, it should provide a means to mediate the resource dilution effects of high fertility that are detrimental to children's development. Children living in households with greater resources would also receive intangible benefits such as access to greater social and cultural capital. Child fostering should be beneficial for children because it moves them into higher SES households and theoretically should lead to decline in inequality. In practice, however, it may be detrimental in the long run and maintain or even exacerbate the differences between fostered and non-fostered children if host households are not invested in giving fostered children the resources they need to improve their welfare.

In many sub-Saharan African countries, fostering is an informal system not regulated by any authority. This leaves foster children extremely vulnerable as there are little or no sanctions for households who threaten fostered children's wellbeing because fostering usually arises from informal arrangements and is not legally recognized. In addition, laws prohibiting exploitative labour that deprives children of health, education and development can protect children in formal employment but may not extend to those in informal sectors and domestic positions if government agencies do not monitor the working conditions of domestic employees. This would harm foster children if the host households are more likely to turn them into unpaid domestic workers because they do not fear the legal consequences of interfering with children's education and general wellbeing.

## **HYPOTHESES**

The reasons for fostering are primarily economic and the literature identifies two main types of fostering: Crises fostering which is a response to unexpected health or economic shocks to households and purposive fostering is a voluntary decision by parents to foster out their children. There are a variety of factors that motivate households to purposively foster out or receive a child. Alliance fostering is supposed to promote social mobility and improve the socio-economic and educational welfare of fostered children and their families. Kinship fostering aims primarily to strengthen kinship ties between families. Childcare fostering facilitates the migration of mothers for economic opportunities. Educational and

apprenticeship fostering facilitates the migration of children for their own educational or economic opportunities.

The “Cinderella effect” was originally used to explain the finding that children are significantly more likely to be maltreated by their step-parents than by biological parents (Daly and Wilson 2001). The developing country literature has adapted the term Cinderella effect for the outcomes of fostered children in their host households. This effect can be explained using Becker’s (1991) economic theory of the family. This predicts that children not living with their biological parents would have fewer resources allocated to them. Adult decision-makers would not have as much incentive to invest in children who are not permanent members in their households and for whom the returns to these investments may benefit other households. Economists are more concerned with the labour incentives for fostering and consider fosterage an exchange of labour for socio-economic resources. Zimmerman (2003) found support for the domestic labour hypothesis with the finding that household demand for domestic labour influenced the likelihood of fostering in children. Households with higher income, older household members and with high educational attainment of female members, all of which should increase demand, were all likely to foster in children.

Both hypotheses indicate that that fostered children would be worse off than non-fostered children. According to the domestic labour theory, children are fostered because of a demand for domestic help in their host households. The Cinderella hypothesis would predict that fostered children would receive lower investments than children living with their parents. The Cinderella effect should be especially severe for fostered children in West Africa. The original research in developing countries focused on children living with step-parents, suggesting that a natural parent was present in the household with the child. However, fostered children do not have a parent living with them to protect their educational interests. The parents of fostered children typically come from lower social class background than the foster households and may not have enough power to ensure their children receive the expected educational benefits. They are also not likely to be living close enough to host households to monitor their children’s wellbeing. Because fostering arrangements are usually voluntary decisions made by parents, no authority regulates the care of fostered children.

These imply that host households have no legal or economic motivation to invest in fostered children's education. Of course, this may not be true of fostering by relatives where kinship alone would provide enough incentive for host households.

## **DATA & METHODS**

The data from this paper comes from 10 West African countries – Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Togo – in the third round of the Multiple International Cluster Surveys (MICS) administered between 2005 and 2007. We restrict the sample to never married children between 6 to 18 years. We exclude children younger than 6 for a number of reasons. The literature shows that the fostering of very young children is rare and occurs for very different reasons than those typically used to foster older children (Akresh 2004, Vandermeersch 2002). Children younger than this would normally not have started primary school. They would also be too young to do much domestic work or economic activity. To determine differences in welfare by foster status, we run two level (individual and country) multi-level models to predict child welfare using foster status and controlling for individual, parental and household characteristics. In this analysis, a fostered child is one who is not orphaned but does not reside in a household with at least one biological parent. The second part of the analysis compares fostered children to non-fostered children in low SES high fertility households, presumably the types of households they originate from to determine if they are better off than children in these households living with resident parents.

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