Does Mother’s Migrant Status Affect Child Fostering in sub-Saharan Africa?: Evidence from Two Informal Settlements in Nairobi, Kenya

Cassandra Cotton¹ & Donatien Beguy²
¹McGill University ²African Population & Health Research Center

Abstract

In this paper, we aim to understand the relationship between migration and child fostering among in-migrants to slum settlements in Nairobi, Kenya. Drawing on both birth history data collected by the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System (NUHDSS) and in-depth interviews conducted in two Nairobi slums, we answer key questions about child fostering strategies used by mothers living in informal settlements. Our research attempts to understand both the prevalence of child fostering among migrant and non-migrant women, as well as why women may decide to foster their children and how their migration affects these decisions.

Quantitative Analysis: We use cross-sectional birth history data collected between 2005 and 2009 from 8,937 women and 17,093 children. Our dependent variable is whether a child is fostered. Our independent variables are mother’s migrant status (recorded as an in-migrant, someone who has resided in the DSA continuously for at least 120 days) and mother’s duration of residence in the DSA. We control for mother’s characteristics (age, marital status, ethnicity, education, total births), child’s characteristics (gender, age), and household characteristics (slum area, wealth status, household ownership). We employ a hierarchical random effects model.

Research Questions

1) How common is child fostering among women living in Nairobi’s slums?
2) Does mother’s migrant status increase likelihood of a child being fostered?
3) How do women make decisions about fostering their children in relation to migration to Nairobi’s slums?

Setting

Our research setting is the Demographic Surveillance Area (DSA) encompassing two slum settlements – Korogocho and Viwandani – in Nairobi, Kenya. These two communities are followed by the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System (NUHDSS), a longitudinal demographic surveillance study carried out by the African Population and Health Research Center. The NUHDSS follows approximately 65,000 individuals (Beguy et al., 2015).

Background

• Fostering is common throughout sub-Saharan Africa, where it may be used to cement kinship ties, provide educational opportunities, and shift the financial burden of child-rearing from biological parents to others. The role of mother’s migration in fostering, however, is relatively unknown.
• Few studies on fostering in Kenya: cross-national studies suggest approximately 7% of children (McDaniel & Zulu 1990) throughout Kenya; no research on fostering rates among those living in Nairobi
• Both migration and fostering decisions often take place within kinship networks and are strategies that help families survive over time. We know relatively little, however, about how mothers make decisions about fostering in relation to migration.

How Many Children are Fostered?

14.5% of all children are fostered. Recent-in-migrants report more fostered children (18.9% of their children) compared to non-in-migrants (12.4%).

While over 20% of children of women residing for less than 1 year are fostered, just 7% of children of long-term residents live elsewhere.

When are Children Fostered?

Different Timelines of Migration & Fostering in Women’s Lives
- 4 main trajectories of childbearing, migration & fostering

Why are Children Fostered?

Financial Reasons
- "I came with [my] husband and children. I took some of my kids back home because life was too difficult here." Patricia, Viwandani, 3 currently fostered
- "Due to financial problems, I couldn’t come to stay with her here. How can you even go to wash somebody’s clothes while with her? I had to leave her with my brother so that I can be able to work and provide for her needs." Julia, Viwandani, 1 currently fostered

Fears about life in the slums
- "Interviewer: Why does your child stay in rural home? Respondent: I didn’t want him to join bad company and the peer influence of Nairobi." Grace, Viwandani, 2 currently fostered

Preferences of extended kin
- "She was staying with her grandmother… My mother was lonely having lost all her children except me… I could have refused anybody else.” Frances, Korogocho, 1 previously fostered

References