

Child Fosterage Dynamics: Fostered Children's Well-being and Challenges in Selected Households in Lagos State, Nigeria

Extended Abstract

The incidence of child labour in fostering practices seems to have risen during and after the oil boom in the 1970s in major cities in Nigeria (Ebigbo 2003). The post-boom era witnessed major economic deterioration, manifested in dwindling returns on investments, retrenchment and unemployment as well as migration from rural to urban areas. The cumulative effects of these challenges disempowered many families to the extent that some of them had to send their children to live with others in order to minimise the economic hardships they were experiencing. However, such children are increasingly pushed into the performance of menial jobs such as hawking, loading and off-loading of wares in the streets and in homes (Ayobade 2008; Eloundou-Enyegue, & Stokes, 2002). In spite of this, research on child labour as an integral part of fostering has been limited, thus bringing to the fore the need to examine the relationships between child labour and fostering practices. It is in this regard that the study sought to investigate the effect of foster children's activities on their social well-being by taking into consideration gender, types of commercial activities undertaken in foster homes, the role of biological parents on foster children's social and economic wellbeing as well as the factors that lead to child labour under such circumstances. In spite of this, research on child labour as an integral part of fostering has been limited, thus bringing to the fore the need to examine the relationships between child labour and fostering practices. It is in this regard that the study sought to investigate the effect of foster children's activities on their social well-being by taking into consideration gender, types of commercial activities undertaken in foster homes, the role of biological parents on foster children's social and economic wellbeing as well as the factors that lead to child labour under such circumstances.

Methodology

In order to appreciate the problem under study, a descriptive survey comprising both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (in-depth interviews and observations) techniques was adopted. The combination of the two approaches enabled the extraction of descriptive, observational, and narrative data about foster children in the four markets where the study was conducted. The study population consisted of an estimated 20,000 foster children in the major markets of the twenty local government councils in Lagos State (Iginla 2007). A convenient sample size of 150 boys and girls between the ages of 9 and 17 years was selected through key informants and market and household-heads in various lines

of business and communities. The market and household heads were identified through a pilot study embarked upon earlier to ascertain the presence of foster children in the selected communities. They were also instrumental in directing us to key informants that aided in the identification of key subjects of the research. Fifty respondents were selected across the three senatorial districts of Lagos state.

Key findings

Approximately 50 per cent of children in the study were from the South-West region of the country which is populated mostly by the Yorubas; 32.1 per cent were from the South-East, predominantly populated by the Igbos; 17.7 per cent were from the South-South populated mostly by the Ijaws, Ogojas, Ibibios and Efiks, while 2.5 per cent were from the North-Central, populated mostly by the Tivs and Hausas. Since the study was conducted in Lagos, it is not really surprising that the majority of the participants were from the area. The Igbos, the second largest group in the study are known for their entrepreneurial skills and propensity to employ children and close relatives, usually from the hinterlands, as shop assistants (Ebigbo 2006). Seventy-three per cent of the respondents were still attending school as against 27 per cent who were out of school. Of the out-of-school respondents, 16.5 per cent had stopped schooling at the secondary level, 4.3 per cent at the primary level, while 6.1 per cent had never been to school. Even though the majority of respondents were schooling, earlier empirical evidence shows that the majority of child labourers are out of school (Isamah and Okunola 1997). Nonetheless, the high number of out-of-school children in the study, while not representative of the general situation, implies that a good number of children in cities like Lagos are unable to fully enjoy their right to personal development and education as expected under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the Nigerian Constitution and related Acts of Parliament. 40.9 per cent had lost either of their biological parents, twenty-nine (25.2 per cent) had lost both parents, while twenty-four (20.9 per cent) had surviving parents. However, fifteen (13.0 per cent) had no information about the current status of their parents.. The main activities the foster children engaged in were selling of sachet and table water, hawking of vegetables, and grinding of ingredients like pepper and tomatoes. The daily incomes arising out of these activities ranged between ₦3,500 and ₦15,000.

Impact of Activities on the Children's Well-being: The in-school foster children who were all attending public schools generally had little or no time in engaging themselves with academic work, especially after school hours. Yet, the general perception of public education at both primary and secondary levels is that it is staffed with incompetent or ill-motivated teachers, have limited teaching and learning materials and so generally incapable of providing quality education to children (Okunola and Ikuomola 2009). Forty-seven of the

foster children said they were attending evening lessons instead of regular schools because they arrived in Lagos in the middle of the school year. However, they expected to be enrolled in regular schools at the beginning of the new academic year. For the in-school children, 14 years was the minimum age at which they gained admission into junior secondary school. It is evident in the study that the number of hours spent working increases with age, as the older the children became, the more hours they had to work both on weekdays and weekends. Similar concerns were raised by most of the respondents at the secondary school level. However, children in the primary schools within the age brackets of 9 and 12 years were less concerned with the number of hours they were working; instead, their concerns centred on what to eat and the suitability of the market environment as a play ground as well as a place of work. Fortunately, their work load tended to be less than that of those in the secondary schools. Not surprisingly, majority of the female respondents (33.9 per cent) did not enjoy the work, especially domestic chores, that they had to do because they found it too demanding. This was a common complaint from children who lived in homes where the foster parents were in the process of raising a family. As for the male counterparts, 11.3 per cent found hawking and other work in the markets interesting because they could meet and play with their friends. Altogether, 53.1 per cent (29.6 per cent male and 23.5 per cent female) claimed to enjoy the work they did as against 45.2 per cent who did not. On dietary habits, the culture of buying foods piecemeal from vendors was observed among a sizeable number of respondents in the mornings. However, there were a few others (7 per cent) who sometimes ate at home before going to school, especially on Mondays as the leftovers from Sunday meals were served as breakfast. Otherwise, they were given between ₦20 and ₦100 for breakfast, depending on their age. Those whose schools were not far from their homes or the markets were asked to return home or go to the markets during school break for their breakfast; others had to forfeit their meals because they had too much work to do. Others preferred to be given money, because it gave them the freedom to make their own choices about food and drinks. The experiences of two-third of the respondents reflect some of the findings of (Bledsoe 1990; Bicego, Rutstein and Johnson 2003) to the effect that a number of foster children experience more work, less well-being and education, compared to other children in the same household. As a result of such developments, researchers like Foster (2000) have concluded that the fostering system in urban areas has been stressed and damaged beyond repair.

Gender Preference and Activities of Foster Children: The exploitative element that sometimes characterises fostering is evident in the study as foster parents tend to see fostering as an investment, something to profit from at an appropriate time. While foster children are engaged in all sorts of

domestic activities regardless of their gender, the interviews however show that functions such as babysitting are reserved for female foster children. In addition, the foster mothers claimed that even though they preferred fostering girls at the early stages of their marriage, they would be indifferent to gender at the latter stages when they would no longer be bearing children. With regard to commercial activities however, there appeared to be a gender preference

Conclusion The differential engagement of foster children in the public sphere in laborious economic activities, in comparison to biological children, defeats the major reason and philosophy behind child fostering. With the varying degrees and circumstances found surrounding fostering practices in selected markets in Lagos State, Nigeria, foster children can be said to be disadvantaged, relative to other children within the same household.

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