

# **Child Fosterage Dynamics in Selected Markets in Lagos State, Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

Trend and outcome studies of fostering practices and child labour often overlooked the issue of child labour in fostering practices. Thus the study examines child fosterage dynamics in selected markets in Lagos state, Nigeria. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, the study exposes how children are being used as economic support by foster parents and the exploitation of the socialization process which sees fostering as part of the upbringing of a child. Major findings from the study revealed that child labour is on the increase and the effects were negative on the children. Findings were linked to the downturn of the economy which prompted child labour as a coping strategy. On the whole, child fostering was viewed as important. Based on these findings, the study suggested that there is need for policies and interventions to eradicate child labour among foster parents in major markets and commercial outlets.

## **Introduction**

The fostering of children is an ancient phenomenon in Africa. Many researchers, and non-governmental agencies have noted that child fostering, the institution in which parents send their biological children to live with another family, is widespread in Sub-Saharan Africa (Eloundou-Enyegue and Stokes 2002; Verhoef and Morelli 2007). This is because in an African society, children belong not only to their biological parents but also to the entire community hence both are supposed to play a significant role in their upbringing. Children are also seen as useful helpers by their parents; the belief is that engaging children in work enhances their usefulness to themselves and the entire society (Aderinto 1997; Ayobade 2008). Generally the basic aspects of fostering in Africa are ‘traditional’ and are connected to customary child training, and to the apprenticeship practice for certain professions that a child not only learns from the master, but also works for him and lives with him (Goody 1982). Describing the uniqueness of West African fostering, in terms of its tradition,

prevalence and the early age at which children are sent out, Isiugo-Abanihe (1985), noted that:

Fostering here is rooted in kinship structures and traditions, children are sent out not only in the event of family crisis or when one or both natural parents cannot, for some reason, manage to bring them up. Rather, the sending out of children is practiced by both stable and unstable families, married and single mothers, healthy and handicapped parents, rural and urban homes, and wealthy and poor parents (p.56).

Goody (1973) also echoed the disciplinary aspect of fostering to involve the sending out of, male children to their mothers' brothers' homes to be raised, while female children might be claimed by the fathers' sisters in infancy or early childhood. Also, in matrilineal societies, children on occasion were raised by maternal kin with claims and responsibilities over children.

In recent times however, the quest for urban upbringing, educational needs, temporary and long-term migration and economic crisis, often overshadow and prompt parents to foster out their children (UNICEF, UNAIDS, and PEPFAR 2006; Grant and Yeatman 2012). And fostering is often one of the ways some young couples and African women particularly, are able to combine labour force participation with motherhood (Vandermeersch 2002; Alber 2004; Grant and Yeatman 2012). Thus reducing the ages at which children are fostered as a result of new parental roles in households and urban economies under transformation (Fiawoo 1978; Bledsoe 1994; Evans and Miguel 2007). as African communities became more complex in structure and in population, alongside the introduction of cash economy and western way of life, a number of problems regarding the traditional way of fostering children emerged (Isamah and Okunola 1997; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). For example, according to the Nigerian Demographic, Health and Educational Survey (2004, 2008) most out-of- school children in cities are children living outside their biological homes, most likely in fostered homes. It is quite likely that many of the children were fostered with the intention of exploiting their labour without the

knowledge of their biological parents. In spite of the exploitative dimension some people have introduced into the practice of fostering, it serves a very useful cultural function where the less privileged can send their children to live and pursue their education with other family members. However, evidence from the 1990 Survey on the Social Dimensions of Adjustment in the West Africa Sub Region shows the education expenses made on fostered children tend to be lower than those made on the household heads' own children (Nigerian Demographic, Health and Educational Survey 2008).

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, dwindling returns on investment and a resulting rise in retrenchment, unemployment, food insecurity, and migration from rural areas to the cities. The cumulative effects of these disempowered many families to the extent that they had to send their children to live with others in order to minimize the economic hardships they were experiencing. The economic down turn in cities has minimized the long term benefits of fosterage to the child since the struggle to survive now outweighs the proper nurturing of children. Foster children therefore are increasingly pushed into the performance of menial jobs on the streets and in homes (Ayobade 2008). The importance of children in society cannot be overemphasized because they are the future and for that reason their right to education, self-expression and freedom from exploitation need to be upheld (UNESCO 2003). Instead of nurturing children they are pushed into economic activities like hawking, loading and off-loading of wares, which in many cases are inimical to their physical, mental, social and moral development.

In spite of this, research on child labour as an integral part of fostering has been limited, hence the need to examine the relationships between child labour and fostering practices is a paramount one. In this regard, this 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 children undertake in the foster homes, the role of biological parents on foster children's social and economic wellbeing as well as the factors that produce and sustain child labour under such circumstances.

Developmental theory provides a useful framework through which some of the more proximal causes of fostering and its implications on the welfare of the child can be understood. To survive and thrive, children and adolescents need to grow up in a family that provides for their changing needs. Recent theories like Thomas and Chess's (1986) goodness of fit, and Scarr and McCartney's (1983) gene/environment interaction have shown why children should remain with 'extended' families in indigenous care system. The latter concluded that children's need to survive and to thrive simply explains fostering, while children respond differently at different environments, depending on their level of physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological development. A young person's developmental stage will also be a factor in determining the kinds of support and protection the child needs to survive and possibly thrive. This is a crucial period for establishing survival, growth trajectory, and development of brain function; language acquisition, curiosity, and the emerging understanding of cause and effect (Fabes and Martin 2002). To some extent fosterage arrangements, if not well probed, might jeopardize these important milestones. While there are specific risks to youth agencies, survival and development, children generally are more vulnerable but are also easily attached if a better caregiver is provided (Foster 2000). This evolved balance of vulnerability with potential for attachment makes being fostered early in life both a liability and an asset. Past research has found that children other than adults are most likely to be taken in by others (Townsend and Dawes 2004), while older children face different dilemmas. The developmental tasks associated with middle childhood are

continued physical growth, understanding of rules and responsibilities, peer relationships and family identity, literacy skills, emotional expression and self-regulation, and problem-solving skills (Schaeffer 2000). This is often the time children fall out of the family structure or place of residence and become street children or involved in exploitative labour in major cities, if not checked (Aptekar 2002). There are several problems associated with this outcome as the children's schooling, and in extreme cases their physical and mental development may be compromised. It must be noted that fostering as a socio-cultural practice is not inimical in itself, but the act of economic exploitation in the form of child labour that needs to be addressed.

### **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 research areas comprising the major markets in all the twenty local government councils in Lagos State (Iginla 2007). A convenient sample size of 115 children between the ages of 9 and 17 years was selected through key informants and market-heads in various lines of business. The market heads were identified through a pilot study embarked upon earlier to ascertain the presence of foster children in the selected markets. They were also instrumental in directing us to key informants that aided in the identification of key subjects of the research. Thirty respondents were selected in Oshodi market, twenty-eight from Lagos Island market, twenty-nine from Mushin

market, and twenty-eight from Kosofe market, all in the three senatorial districts in Lagos state.

## Discussion of Results

### *The Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

Of the 115 respondents in the study, sixty-eight (59.1 per cent) were female and forty-seven (40.9 per cent) male; all were below the age of 18 years. In terms of their religious affiliation, 71.7 per cent were Christians, 20 per cent Muslims, and 8.3 per cent animists. The majority of them were 14 years old (27 per cent) while 23 per cent were 17 years old. Other age categories were 9 years (3.5 per cent), 10 years (4.3 per cent), 11 years, (21.2 per cent), 12 years (13 per cent), and 13 years (8 per cent). The age distribution reflect the usual ages at which children are most likely to be given out in fosterage (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Verhoef and Morelli 2007).

**Table 1: General Background of the Children**

Age	Male	Female	Children in school	Children out of school	Average working hours per day
9	2	2	3	1	3
10	2	5	6	1	3
11	10	13	17	6	3.5
12	3	12	14	1	3.7
13	2	7	5	4	3.9
14	11	20	23	8	5.7
17	17	9	16	10	6.2
	47	68	84 (73.0%)	31(27.0%)	
<b>Total</b>	115 (100%)		115 (100%)		

Approximately 50 per cent of children in the study were from the South-West region of the country which is populated mostly by the Yoruba; 32.1 per cent were from the South-East, predominantly populated by the Igbos; 17.7 per cent were from the South-South populated by the Ijaws, Ogojas, Ibibios and Efiks, while 2.5 per cent were from the North-Central, also 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 hinter lands, 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. This is consistent with earlier empirical evidence that the majority of child labourers are out of school (Isamah and Okunola 1997). The high number of out-of-school children in the study 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. Besides, it impacts negatively on the national goal of education for all by the year 2020.



**Table 2: Current status of children’s biological parents**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Both parents alive</b>	<b>One parent is alive</b>	<b>Both parents are dead</b>	<b>No Response</b>	<b>Total</b>
Male	9 (7.8%)	6 (5.2%)	17 (14.8%)	15 (13.0%) (13.0%)	<b>47 (40.9%)</b>
Female	15 (13.1%)	41 (35.7%)	12 (10.4%)	-	<b>68 (59.1%)</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>24 (20.9%)</b>	<b>47 (40.9%)</b>	<b>29 (25.2%)</b>	<b>15 (13.0%)</b>	<b>115 (100%)</b>

Regarding parentage, forty-seven respondents (40.9 per cent) had lost one 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) were not interested in revealing any information about the current status of their parents. Information about the status of their biological parents is critical because it provides clues and motives for foster care (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). Possibly, fear and mistrust of strangers prevented them from opening up to the researcher in spite of the assurances given to them. 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 ₦1,500 and ₦2,000<sup>i</sup>.

***Why the Persistence of Fosterage?***

The traditional reasons for fostering vary widely but the most common are long term illness of parents, death, divorce, and parents’ separation. On the positive side the reasons could be mutual help among family members, socialization and education and the

strengthening of family ties. It is for these reasons that child circulation has become a characteristic feature of African family systems. For instance, Isiugo-Abanihe (1985) notes that child fostering serves not only as a reinforcement mechanism for social bonds, but also helps to maintain the high fertility rates through the redistribution of the economic burden of child rearing. It is therefore an integral part of the extended family structure in African societies.

**Table 3: Reasons for Fostering**

<b>Reasons for living in a foster home</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
To attend school and learn a trade	25	21.7
To serve as house help	10	8.7
Poverty	7	6.1
Death of Parent(s)	16	13.9
Marital problems (Separation/divorce)	13	11.3
To escape rural life	11	9.6
Migration of parents /transfer	14	12.2
I don't know	19	16.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 outlines the reasons why children live in foster homes rather than with their biological parents. The paramount reason was the quest for education and artisanal skills. Other key reasons were marital problems between parents (11.3 per cent), poverty (6.1 per cent), and migration of parents to other cities (12.2 per cent). The reasons that emerged from the study are not radically different from the traditional reasons adduced to explain child fostering in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Some of the reasons clearly show the positive role fostering plays in propping up the extended family system. For

instance, the second most important reason was the death of parents which raises the issue of collective responsibility of the extended family in looking after their deceased relatives' children. The foster parents may not necessarily be economically better off but they are obliged to show solidarity by making some sacrifices. However the strains and difficulties experienced in the foster homes and places of work undermine its role in cementing family relations. It is evident that excessive household demands on foster children leave psychological scars on them and also weaken family ties in the long run (Filmer and Pritchett 1999; Sewpaul 2001).

### ***Impact of the 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. In Nigeria, public education at both the primary and secondary levels are considered as cheap, staffed with incompetent or ill-motivated teachers, and so generally incapable of providing quality education to children (Okunola and Ikuomola 2009). 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 from Table 1 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. Simi, a 17-year old girl from Ijsha explained the difficulties encountered as a senior secondary school student this way:

Lagos was very sweet when I first arrived because my aunty would pick me when primary schools closed, buy me food and take me home. But all these stopped when

she started having children when I was in JSS1<sup>ii</sup>, because I started work seriously. I thought it was fun assisting in carrying the baby at first, but later it prolonged, both at home and in the market, gradually it became my duty to go to the market and start selling until she joined me. It is not easy because there is usually no time to read since I am always already tired after school but have to go straight to the market (Simi, female, 17 years, Ijesha).

Similar concerns were raised by most of the children 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 those in the secondary schools.

**Table 4: Children’s attitude towards work**

Research question	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Do you enjoy both economic and domestic activities assigned to you?			
Yes	34(29.6%)	27(23.5%)	61(53.1%)
No	13 (11.3%)	39(33.9%)	52(45.2%)
No response	-	2(1.7%)	2(1.7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>47(40.9%)</b>	<b>68(59.1%)</b>	<b>115(100.0%)</b>

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 to be 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 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 enjoy their work.

Apparently, the children aged between 9 and 10 years tended to enjoy work more than the other groups probably because much of their work was within the domestic domain or they had just arrived and were being introduced to life in the neighbourhood. However, as they progressed in age, they found work to be less and less pleasant. For instance, for those aged between 12 and 17 years, the working hours rose from 3.7 to 6.2 hours per day since they would have passed the stage of pampering, thus more and more of their time had to be devoted to work. Pampering here represents a period of time when the children are introduced to their neighbourhood and surroundings and are shown the nearby markets and selling points in the streets where they are likely to work later. At

this stage they do little or no work, thus a false sense of security and freedom is created. However after this period, the children would be assigned more work and responsibilities which understandably they might find tedious and uninteresting. Apparently, as they grew older and approached their teens they gradually resigned themselves to the realities of their work. This was summarized by a respondent from Kwara state, in Ojuwoye market at Mushin:

I remember when I came two or three years ago, my in-law used to pamper me; the first time he took me to the market where he was selling building materials then to see things, not knowing that his intention was to gradually introduce me to the work. Initially I was unhappy, but after two months, I had to stop complaining and to see my future in it...(Deji, male, 14years, Mushin).

This knowledge may ultimately be converted into economic capital within various fields upon entering adulthood, thus enabling the youth to develop survival skills and competencies in the street economy. While this is the basis of the traditional concept of fostering, that the knowledge could become 'embodied cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986), it is often exploitative hence some of the children's negative perception of the practice. The relationship between age and social wellbeing was also found to be more favourable for younger foster children between the ages of 9 and 12 years as opposed to those from 13 years onward. The younger ones were apparently better cared for so they appeared more relaxed even while they were being interviewed; their school uniforms were cleaner and sometimes well ironed, unlike their relatively older counterparts whose school uniforms and house wears were unkempt and in some cases tattered. Children with foster parents working in the clothing business were better dressed because they had to look nice to attract customers to the shops, as noted by Tola, a 14-year-old participant:

Once it is time to go to the market, I am always told to put on my best clothes, because it attracts customers. I have been severely beaten a number of times for not dressing well to the shop. Ever since, I have learnt my lesson (Tola, female, 14 years, Mushin).

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 N10<sup>1</sup> and N20<sup>2</sup> 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 as noted by Tola.

The money is what I am used to, whenever we eat at home, aunty will not give us the money (Tola, 14 years, Mushin).

More than half of the respondents, 62 out of the 115 noted that most often they ate late because by the time they finished their work in the market and managed to get home through the heavy traffic, it would already be late in the night. For those who lived around the market place, 53 of the 115 participants had the privilege of eating around normal times in the evenings. However, most of them (seventy-one) could not get regular morning meals before going to school. Responses from in-school children showed that lunch was often late and irregular. The earliest time was estimated by the children to be between 3pm and 5pm depending on the distance of the participants' school from the

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<sup>1</sup>\$0.06  
<sup>2</sup> \$0.12

market. Regarding their health, the majority (77.4 per cent) noted that their health concerns were attended to whenever they fell ill. However, there were those who were afraid to report any ailment to their foster parents because of the harsh reaction they might receive. This is made clearer from the account of James below.

It is always difficult for me to tell my foster parents that I am ill because of the scolding that usually comes with it. The last time I had malaria I could not eat, and I did not tell my aunty and uncle not until I fainted and my neighbours rushed me to a nearby chemist shop, before I was eventually taken to the hospital (James, male, 13years, Kosofe).

Probing into the reason why he was scared of reporting the ailment to the foster parents, James noted:

My aunty and her husband do complain a lot that I am fond of wasting their money and resources, so I find it difficult to tell them I need malaria drugs; the malaria is the result of exposure to mosquitoes in the market, because we usually close late at night, and our shop stand is directly on top of the drainage.

The experiences of James 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. 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***

According to Mrs. Edem, a mother of two with a male foster child, the nature of the work or business activities of foster parents and the age and sex of the foster child are basic



determinants in child fosterage. These will also determine the type of work the foster child will be engaged in either at home or in the market place. She noted:

This boy (pointing to him) is a relative of my husband; when I needed someone to assist me at home after my second child's birth, my husband went to the village (Eastern Nigeria) and arrived with Emeka, Although I would have preferred a girl, he felt that a boy would be more helpful to both of us at home and in the shop (Mrs. Idem, Kosofe),

Three of the five foster parents interviewed corroborated Mrs. Idem's view that to a large extent, the gender of the foster child determines the duties that are assigned to them. They pointed out that even among their own biological children, responsibilities are distributed according to gender. Another interviewee claimed that:

In fostering a child I went for a boy because training a male child is an investment one can reap from, it is even cheaper than paid house help. This particular boy with me has been very helpful to me, especially when my wife was at school in Lagos State University two years ago. He does virtually everything from domestic to commercial activities at home and in my shop, a female would have ran away, as was the case with a neighbour last year (Mr. Ojogbane, male, Kosofe).

His wife added:

Girls are even more difficult to train, they are exposed to a lot of problems ranging from rape, molestation, harassment...From my own experience as a child, my niece was a victim, at an early age of 16, although this was partly due to my auntie's fault and neglect, she became pregnant and was eventually sent packing (back to the village). The problem it created between her biological parents and mine is best imagined (Mrs. Ojogbane, Kosofe).

The exploitative element that sometimes characterizes fostering is evident in Mr. Ojogbane’s classification of the relationship 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 female children at the early stages of their marriage because of the care-taking role they would assume for their little children, they would be indifferent to their 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. For example, according to the two male foster parents in the study, male children were preferred as assistants in trading activities such as wood, iron, cement, and ornaments, that are dominated by men. In contrast, female foster children are preferred in trading activities that deal with ‘feminine’ things like vegetables, cooking utensils, and beauty products.

**Table 5: Gender distribution of work**

Type of Work	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Domestic activities/Assistance in the market	11(9.6%)	21(18.3%)	32(27.7%)
Sale of wares at the market	7(6.1%)	15(13.0%)	22(19.1%)
Sale of wares both at home and market	12(10.4%)	19(16.5%)	31(27.0%)
Learning trade/working	17(14.8%)	13(11.3%)	30(26.1%)
Total	47 (40.9%)	68(59.1%)	115(100.0%)

Table 5 indicates that 9.6 per cent of male respondents were variously involved in domestic activities and providing assistance in the market as against 18.3 per cent of female respondents. For those who engaged solely in commercial activities (selling of goods) for their foster parents, 13 per cent were female compared to 6.1 per cent male counterparts. Similarly, there were more females engaged in the sale of wares both at home and in the markets than males. However, more males than females served as both apprentices and workers earning incomes for their foster parents. Evidently, most of the children are in one way or the other involved in commercial activities as confirmed by a 14-year-old female participant, Adama, in Mushin market:

I have to work with my uncle's wife everyday in her nylon-cutting and soap-making shop here in Mushin, I am on her pay roll now; she saves the money for me and sends it home to my mother in the village every month; she is sick and this is the only way my uncle said he can help her, so I have to leave the village in Oyo to learn a trade and work so as to struggle for myself and my mother since the death of my father (Adama, Female, 14 years, Mushin).

Though most of the children do not see their income-generating activities as negative, it was observed that many of them were usually overworked by the end of the day. This was even more noticeable among children who combined schooling with after-school work in the markets.

### ***The Influence of Biological Parents on Foster Parents' Duties***

Efforts were made to determine the influence of biological parents' on the schooling of their children while they were with the foster parents. To begin with, of the thirty-one (30 per cent) respondents who were not attending school at that time, nineteen (16.5 per cent)

had stopped schooling altogether, while five (4.3 per cent) had stopped schooling at the primary level. Apparently, children whose biological parents were from the Western part of Nigeria (Yoruba-speaking area) were frequently in contact with them compared to those from the other parts of Nigeria. Two reasons could account for this; the first is proximity. Lagos state is situated in the western part of Nigeria, thus it was much easier for the parents to travel to visit their children or keep in touch through mobile phones. The second is the state's free education policy at both primary and secondary levels. It has also been argued that the average Yoruba family takes children's education more seriously than any other ethnic group in Nigeria (NDHES 2008). In the case of the other participants from across the River Niger (Igbos, Calabar, Effik and Ibibio-speaking), much emphasis was placed on the acquisition of trading skills as the path to future success. There was also a widely-held belief amongst the participants that 'coming to Lagos will make them successful'. This view is common to most people in the rural areas because they see the city as a place of unending opportunities that could transform their station in life. Those who fared worst in terms of parental influence on their education were respondents from Calabar and Akwa Ibom. The obvious explanation for this is the hundreds of kilometres that separate the children in Lagos from the parents back home. For example, five of them had never seen their parents in the two years preceding the study, neither were they able to contact them through telephones. Of the total number of respondents who had at least a surviving parent (twenty-four with both parents alive and forty-seven with one single parent alive), twenty-one had not seen their parents in the past two years, as against thirteen participants from the western state. Five of the respondents could not recall when they last saw their biological parents; in response, a child said in Pidgin English "e don tai oh wen I see my family since I come", meaning he

has not seen his family since his arrival. However they were in touch through phones.

Simon, a 13-year-old native of Calabar, who was living in Ijesha pointed out:

My parents live in far away Calabar, and the family I am staying with just does not want me to school, they do not believe in education because they themselves are not educated.

According to Kolomoh, a 14-year-old Yoruba boy living in Aguda, a relatively highbrow area compared to Ijesha,

In my own case, I was just lucky to have been placed in a school, not just a school but also a private one for that matter! I was also schooling before coming to Lagos, my parents do not play with education. Every holiday my dad visits and monitors my performance in school.

For Uduaken, a 17-year-old boy from Akwa-Ibom, “They found out that I was brilliant that was why I am in school today, not necessarily because of my parents! They have not visited me since I left home”.

Apart from schooling, the majority of biological parents had little or no influence on the way and manner in which their children were being raised in the foster homes. However some of the biological parents were well-informed about the wellbeing of their children. Apparently, those who were not doing well at school or engaged in deviant and sometimes criminal behaviours were either sent back home or were cautioned by emissaries. Sometimes, people travelling to Lagos were asked to visit the children on their behalf thus maintaining some contact, and through that exerting some form of influence in the lives of their children.

## **Conclusion**

The differential engagement of foster children in the public as against the private domain in comparison with biological children, and in more laborious economic activities defeats the major reasons and philosophy behind fostering practices. 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.

The study observed the engagement of children as young as 9 years hawking wares for their foster parents. There were also others whose biological parents work and live within the suburb of the foster parents but do not pay regular visit to their children. Thus unaware of the laborious, cumbersome and time-consuming economic activities foster children are engaged in outside their homes to improve their personal or familial wellbeing through schooling and learning of a trade. Unfortunately, in recent times, as with many social practices in Africa, fostering tends to impact more on girls than boys since the former usually have to sacrifice their education for the wellbeing of the foster family because of the domestic responsibilities they are assigned to do. Besides, though an exploitative dimension has been introduced into the practice, fostering is usually at the instance of the biological relatives of the child. According to Verhoeff and Morelli (2007), the cooperation between the donor and recipient family colours the experience and outcomes of children in their foster home. This means that the true extent of the child's experiences is difficult to ascertain since it is shrouded in family relations. Even though child fostering has always been an integral part of African culture, it was never intended to be an avenue for foster parents to exploit the child for their economic gains. The study therefore recommends that biological parents and relatives should carefully examine the socio-economic intentions of would-be foster parents before giving out their

children. It is also imperative that the laws regulating child fostering in Nigeria are implemented to the letter.

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<sup>i</sup> Between US\$10 and US \$15 daily

<sup>ii</sup> Junior secondary school