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*Research Article*

**‘One hand does not bring up a child:’  
Child fostering among single mothers in Nairobi  
slums**

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# **‘One hand does not bring up a child:’ Child fostering among single mothers in Nairobi slums<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

### **BACKGROUND**

Childrearing in sub-Saharan Africa is often viewed as collaborative, where children benefit from support from kin. For single mothers living in informal settlements, kin networks may be highly dispersed and offer little day-to-day childrearing support, but may provide opportunities for child fostering.

### **OBJECTIVE**

Our study uses a linked lives approach, where single mothers’ connections with kin and romantic partners may influence whether – and what type of – kin are relied on to support child fostering.

### **METHODS**

We leverage an innovative survey on the kin networks of 404 single mothers and 741 children, collected in 2016, and 41 in-depth interviews conducted in 2011 and 2013, to explore fostering among single mothers in Korogocho and Viwandani, two slums in Nairobi, Kenya.

### **RESULTS**

Quantitative findings show 6.2% of single mothers’ children are fostered, with provision of emotional support associated with lower likelihood of fostering. Both quantitative and qualitative results reflect strong reliance on maternal kin. Maternal kin play a key role in fostering to protect children, to fulfill traditional lineage obligations, and due to their willingness to foster when others will not.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation in the title, ‘one hand does not bring up a child,’ is an English translation of a Kiswahili proverb, *mkono mmoja haulei mwana*, commonly used in East Africa to denote the broader responsibility of kin in raising children. This expression was mentioned by several respondents to describe a common belief, though not specific to their own family situation.

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## **CONTRIBUTION**

This study contributes to a growing body of research on the role of kin in contemporary fostering arrangements in sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, we highlight fostering among a potentially highly vulnerable group: the children of single mothers in slum settlements. Sending children to live with kin may be an important coping strategy for single mothers, both to reduce the burden of raising children alone and to provide children with opportunities to grow up outside the slums.

## **1. Introduction**

Childrearing in sub-Saharan Africa is often viewed as a collaborative process, where children benefit not only from the care of biological parents but also from wider support from extended kin networks. These complex kinship ties – a ‘village’ of support for children – provide opportunities for the obligations and costs associated with raising a child to be distributed beyond the nuclear family, a widespread practice throughout sub-Saharan Africa, often referred to as child fostering (Cotton 2021; Grant and Yeatman 2014; Madhavan, Mee, and Collinson 2014; Goody 1982). Kin involvement with childrearing may be especially important for single mothers, who may rely on kin for both occasional assistance with childrearing and long-term fostering arrangements. Despite the importance of kin support for single mothers, given their precarious economic and social position (Madhavan, Clark, and Schmidt 2021), recent studies in African informal settlements suggest that ties between single mothers, their children, and kin may be weaker than previously thought, potentially due to social and demographic changes including a rise in informal unions, increased women’s migration, and economic precarity (Madhavan et al. 2018; Madhavan, Clark, and Hara 2018; Clark et al. 2017; Beguy, Bocquier, and Zulu 2010; Bocquier and Khasakhala 2009). This may have substantial implications for the role that kin play in supporting single mothers and their children through fostering.

While childrearing in many African settings has long been described as ‘socially distributed’ amongst kin (Madhavan and Gross 2013; Goody 1982), which aptly describes fostering arrangements, to our knowledge no prior studies have explored which non-residential kin single mothers rely on to foster children and why these kin are chosen as caregivers, nor how these arrangements fit into broader exchanges of support among kin. Prior research on child fostering has typically focused on rural families, who may send their children to urban areas due to economic hardship or for enhanced educational opportunities (Alber 2018; Eloundou-Enyegue and Shapiro 2004). Less understood is whether single mothers living in poor urban slums call on kin

living in their rural homelands or in less impoverished urban areas in order to avoid the environmental risks and poor-quality schooling in urban slums.

In this paper we use quantitative and qualitative data collected in two informal settlements in Nairobi, Kenya, to explore patterns of child fostering among single mothers living in slum contexts. First, we use data from a unique kinship support survey carried out in Korogocho, an informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, to describe patterns of children's living arrangements, including where and with whom children are fostered, and how mothers' kin network attributes are associated with fostering. Second, we rely on data from in-depth interviews with single mothers in the Korogocho and Viwandani slums, exploring themes surrounding decisions about children's living arrangements and reliance on kin for fostering. We explore these arrangements through a 'linked lives' life course perspective (Elder 1994, 1987), hypothesizing that women's connections with kin and romantic partners will influence whether – and what type of – kin are relied on to support fostered children.

## **2. Fostering as a safety net for children**

Kin, whether maternal or paternal, have long provided a variety of types of support for children and families throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Verhoef 2005; Notermans 2004; Weinreb 2002). Much of the previous work examining support provided by kin has focused on the contributions of coresidential kin to mothers who live with their children (Gage 1997; Lloyd and Blanc 1996; Desai 1992), primarily due to the dearth of surveys collecting data beyond the household. However, non-residential and geographically dispersed kin may offer a different form of support by fostering-in children.

There is no standard definition of fostering in the demographic and anthropological literature, with some research counting only children in formal arrangements between parents and kin or only children residing separately from both biological parents, while others categorize children as fostered whenever children are not coresident with mothers, regardless of the motivations or duration of the arrangement. There is an extensive body of research describing a variety of types of fostering throughout sub-Saharan Africa, suggesting this is a common form of support offered by kin to both married and unmarried parents (Cotton 2021; Gaydosh 2019; Hedges et al. 2019; Grant and Yeatman 2014; Verhoef 2005; Notermans 2004; Madhavan 2004; Page 1989; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985; Goody 1982). Single mothers in particular appear to benefit from this safety net, with fostering often associated with divorce, widowhood, or remarriage (Gaydosh 2015; Grant and Yeatman 2014; Notermans 2004; McDaniel and Zulu 1996; Page 1989), and occurring more frequently where non-marital motherhood is common (Cotton 2021). Few studies have focused specifically on the fostering arrangements of

single mothers, who may have an increased need to foster their children due to their particularly vulnerable economic and social status in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Having a larger pool of kin, particularly those living outside the slums, may provide single mothers with greater opportunities for fostering. However, kin willingness to foster the children of single mothers may depend on the mothers' circumstances, as some scholars find low willingness among kin to care for children of divorced parents (Gaydosch 2019). As a result, the availability of kin to foster-in children may be limited, particularly if kin networks are small, or kin are already overburdened or disadvantaged, as may be the case for kin of single mothers residing in slums (Clark et al. 2017).

Child fostering is relatively common in Kenya, with estimates suggesting between 7% and 10% of children under age 15 are fostered from biological mothers or both parents (Grant and Yeatman 2012; Beegle et al. 2010; Monasch and Boerma 2004; McDaniel and Zulu 1996). Though this is lower than the fostering prevalence in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, recent studies suggest fostering has remained a common childrearing strategy for Kenyan mothers over time (Cotton 2021), and parents living in Nairobi's slum settlements may rely more on fostering than Kenyan parents as a whole (Cotton 2017; Archambault, de Laat, and Zulu 2012). Fostering arrangements, however, are likely to be heavily dependent on the type of kin support that single mothers in the slums have access to.

## **2.1 Fostering through a linked lives perspective**

Children are deeply embedded in the kin and social networks of their parents in Kenya (Clark et al. 2017) and throughout the world (Dasré, Samuel, and Hertrich 2019; Madhavan and Brooks 2015; Madhavan, Mee, and Collinson 2014; Madhavan 2010). In Kenya, children born to biological parents who maintain a romantic relationship over time may have access to a rich network of both maternal and paternal kin – the relatives of both their mother and their father. When Kenyan children are born to never-married mothers or to parents who later experience union dissolution, their connections to paternal kin may be weaker either because they were never robust or because they became frayed, though connections to maternal kin may remain strong. Thus, the romantic and kin relationships of single mothers affect not only their own connections, but also their children's relationships with members of their networks (Clark et al. 2017; Madhavan et al. 2017; Madhavan, Mee, and Collinson 2014), which may have an impact on whether children are fostered to kin. This can be conceptualized through a 'linked lives' life course approach (Elder 1994, 1987), where the lives of mothers and their children are inextricably linked, as are their connections to kin.

Elder's (1987) original conceptualization of interdependent or linked lives suggests that the life stages and trajectories of individual family members affect, and are affected by, what occurs to each kin member due to "the interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions... rooted in kinship ties" (1987: 184). The trajectory of one family member's life affects the lives of other kin, particularly those that rely on one another for caregiving. Thus, events and transitions in mothers' lives, such as migration, union formation, or the dissolution of romantic and kin relationships, may affect processes and relationships in their children's lives (Dasré, Samuel, and Hertrich 2019; Gilligan, Karraker, and Jasper 2018; Madhavan and Brooks 2015). Fostering cannot be studied in isolation without consideration of the broader connections and linked lives between mothers, children, and members of their kin networks. Fostering involves not only the individual child, but also the parents and the wider group of kin that may be asked to foster. As a result, events taking place in mothers' lives may influence both whether a child is fostered-out in the first place and who they are fostered to, based on which kin are potentially available to provide this support. As Elder's (1987) work suggests, the "individual actions" of a mother fostering a child "become family action" as kin are recruited into fostering arrangements (1987: 186).

Mothers, as adult members of kin networks, negotiate their own romantic and kin relationships, which in turn affects their children's interactions in these wider family systems (Madhavan et al. 2018; Clark et al. 2017; Clark, Cotton, and Marteleto 2015). Mothers' knowledge of, and their relationships with, different kin members may impact which kin can be called on for this purpose, as children are unlikely to be fostered-out to kin that mothers are not aware of, nor can kin easily claim a child for fostering that they do not consider part of their kin network. The interdependence of the lives of kin members will also influence whether kin feel a sense of obligation toward single mothers and their children, and whether they are willing and able to provide fostering support. Mothers with strong kin networks – of either their own relatives or the paternal kin of their children – may be able to rely on these connections to foster-out children. However, the fostering support that single mothers receive from kin may vary by kin network attributes, such as kin type, kin location, and expected obligations and reciprocity within kinship networks.

## **2.2 Maternal versus paternal kinship ties**

Although single motherhood is common in Kenya, with 60% of Kenyan women experiencing single motherhood by age 45 (Clark and Hamplová 2013), the role of kin in assisting single mothers with fostering is not well understood. Single mothers' access to fostering may be dependent on the type of kin embedded in their networks, namely

whether they maintain relationships with their own kin – their child’s maternal kin – and the kin of their child’s father – the child’s paternal kin. Single mothers are likely to experience differential access to maternal and paternal kin, of which the latter may depend on their relationship with the father of the child, how the union ended, and their knowledge of their former partner’s broader kin network.

A mother’s knowledge of and ongoing contact with a child’s paternal kin are likely to influence kin availability to foster children. Her awareness of these paternal kin may be heavily dependent on the type of union she shared with her child’s father. The majority of Kenya’s ethnic groups practice patrilineal descent. Though specific rights and obligations of maternal and paternal kin vary, children who are legitimated by fathers through traditional marriage and bridewealth are typically perceived as belonging to paternal kin (Hakansson 1990; Parkin 1980). Some scholars suggest bridewealth payments in Kenya would be better described as “progeny price,” delineating “rights of ownership” of children to fathers and paternal kin when bridewealth has been paid (Kilbride and Kilbride 1994: 318). Thus, children born within such unions may receive both the protection and resources of their father’s family while the union is intact, and this support may extend beyond a union’s termination depending on the circumstances of the dissolution and kin desire for involvement.

If paternal kin continue to be involved in the lives of children of single mothers following union dissolution, they may provide an important source of fostering based on traditional paternal obligations toward children (Hakansson 1990; Parkin 1980). Historically, paternal kin often claimed children following divorce, taking children of their divorced sons to raise in their paternal home (Kilbride and Kilbride 1994; Hakansson 1990; Parkin 1980). Consequently, children of divorced women may be fostered by paternal kin if families insist on retaining children within their lineage. Similarly, patrilineal claims to both the widows and children of deceased men were common throughout much of Kenya historically, with paternal kin providing support and occasionally practicing levirate marriage to preserve patrilineal connections (Silberschmidt 1999; Lesthaeghe 1989; Obbo 1976). Though these used to be common practices in previous decades, changes in marriage arrangements, increasing women’s rights, and other social changes have limited their occurrence, potentially resulting in fewer children taken from mothers to be fostered with paternal relatives (Mwumo 2015; Nyambedha 2004; Hakansson 1994; Kilbride and Kilbride 1994). Indeed, paternal kin may express less desire to foster children, even those born within traditional customary marriage, as the cost of raising children increases and resources become scarce (Borgerhoff Mulder 2007; Nyambedha 2004). This may be particularly true if the relationship between the woman and her husband was short, or the union ended acrimoniously. If the father refuses to provide for his children following a separation, the paternal kin may similarly be pressured to terminate support and contact with the



child and its mother and may have limited interest in fostering the child. Access to a husband's kin networks following his death may equally be limited depending on both the type of marriage and the strength of the relationship between the wife and extended kin (Nyambedha 2004; Hakansson 1994). However, single mothers who maintain a positive and active connection with these paternal kin may be able to rely on paternal grandparents, aunts, or uncles to foster children if needed. Single mothers having strained relationships with paternal kin may limit their use for voluntary fostering, but may simultaneously increase paternal demands for children that are perceived to belong to the paternal line.

Children born to unmarried women in Kenya may be perceived as belonging solely to maternal kin, depending on lineage practices and whether payments have been made to legitimize the child (Shell-Duncan and Wimmer 1999; Silberschmidt 1999; Hakansson 1994; Parkin 1980). Thus, never-married women who did not have a relationship with their child's father may have few claims to fostering support from paternal relatives of their children, who may not recognize such children as kin, but may receive substantial support from their own relatives. Children born within informal unions, known as 'come-we-stay' in Kenya (Bocquier and Khasakala 2009), may similarly lack access to support from paternal kin. When Kenyan adults enter into come-we-stay unions, they typically do so without the involvement or blessing of their families, and bridewealth is rare. Where children are born outside marriage and no bridewealth has been received, and the mothers remarry or otherwise leave their maternal home, the children may be expected to be fostered by and remain in the custody of their maternal grandparents or uncles (Silberschmidt 1999; Shell-Duncan and Wimmer 1999; Shell-Duncan 1994; Parkin 1980). Thus, we may expect that never-married women will have greater access to maternal kin, and may be more likely to turn to these kin to foster their children. In fact, research increasingly suggests a 'feminization' of kinship, with kin networks turning toward matrilineal and matrifocal practices as traditional sources of patrilineal support decline, even among married women (Jackson 2015; Kariuki and Nelson 2006). This is consistent with research on orphan-care in the region, which suggests that maternal kin, especially grandmothers, are stepping in to fulfill traditionally patrilineal roles when it comes to fostering children (Oleke, Blystad, and Rekdal 2005; Nyambedha, Wandibba, and Aagaard-Hansen 2003).

### **2.3 Geographically dispersed kinship**

Single mothers' reliance on kin for fostering while living in Nairobi's slums may be very different to the kin support that such mothers have historically depended on in rural contexts. Kin networks of single mothers living in Nairobi's slums may be widely

geographically dispersed due to high female migration (Beguy, Bocquier, and Zulu 2010), limiting the availability of nearby kin to provide hands-on support to women and their children (Madhavan et al. 2018). These distant kin, often located in rural areas, may provide another important form of support by fostering-in children when women seek alternative living arrangements. Many migrants to Nairobi maintain strong ties with rural kin (Cotton and Beguy 2021; Mberu et al. 2013; Owuor 2007; Agesa 2004) and depend on these connections for reciprocal exchange of financial assistance, material goods, and emotional support. These connections may be particularly critical for single women raising children in high-poverty urban contexts, as a means of sharing the burden of childrearing and providing opportunities for children to leave the slums through fostering.

Thus, a geographically dispersed kinship network may be both a disadvantage and a benefit to single mothers. Recent research in Nairobi's slums suggests that tenuous kinship networks are common among single mothers, with many women reporting small networks of potential kin – those who could assist them – and even smaller networks of active kin – those who actively engage in supporting women through financial support or childcare (Clark et al. 2017). The kin networks of migrant single mothers are likely to be even sparser, particularly regarding nearby coresidential and non-residential kin (Madhavan et al. 2018). Thus, migrant mothers, of whom there are many in Nairobi's slums (Beguy, Bocquier, and Zulu 2010), may have relatively fewer nearby kin to assist with day-to-day childrearing than non-migrant mothers, which may increase the need to foster children elsewhere. Conversely, migrant mothers may be more likely than non-migrant women to have more kin living in rural areas or other non-slum urban areas, who can provide assistance through fostering-in the children of slum residents. As a result, a greater number of kin living in rural or other non-slum areas may be of particular benefit with regard to fostering for single mothers, whose children face substantial risks to health and safety within slum contexts, alongside low access to education and other services (Clark, Madhavan, and Kabiru 2018; Beguy et al. 2015; Ernst, Phillips, and Duncan 2013).

In this paper we aim to describe the fostering of children of single mothers in Nairobi's slums. Using a mixed methods approach, we explore fostering arrangements, determining where and with whom fostered children live and paying particular attention to the size, composition, and quality of single mothers' kinship networks and to the type of relationship single mothers previously had with their children's fathers. We answer the following questions about single mothers' fostering arrangements: (1) How are kin network attributes associated with fostering? (2) Which kin care for fostered children, and does the type of kin depend on the mother's type of union with the biological father at birth?

### **3. Study context**

Our study sites are Korogocho and Viwandani, informal slum settlements on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya. Korogocho and Viwandani are part of the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System (NUHDSS). Since 2002 the NUHDSS has collected quarterly data from all households and individuals residing in the two communities, including data on demographic events and population health. The NUHDSS has been described in detail elsewhere (Beguy et al. 2015). It comprises about 64,000 individuals and more than 25,000 households and encompasses the diversity of Kenyan ethnic groups, including large populations of Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, and Kamba people (Beguy et al. 2015). Traditional Kikuyu and Kamba home areas are geographically near Nairobi, while Luo and Luhya peoples are from Western Kenya, which informs the population of in-migrants. The populations of both communities are highly mobile, with substantial circular migration of women and children (Beguy, Bocquier, and Zulu 2010). Conditions within the slums are harsh, with poor sanitation, low quality housing, and high unemployment, particularly among women (Wamukoya et al. 2020). It is estimated that more than 50% of urban Kenyans live in slums or slum-like conditions like those in Korogocho and Viwandani (UN-Habitat 2014).

The specific focus of our study is on child fostering among single mothers residing in Nairobi's slums. Few studies highlight fostering within Nairobi's slums, though the available research suggests that children, particularly of migrant parents residing in the slums, often move elsewhere or are left behind when parents migrate (Cotton and Beguy 2021; Cotton 2017; Archambault, de Laat, and Zulu 2012). Estimates of fostering in Viwandani and Korogocho slums suggest 14% of children of female residents under age 16 live apart from their mothers (Cotton 2017). As in other contexts, fostering out of Nairobi's slums increases with age, with low prevalence of fostering – about 5.8% – among children under age 5 and rising prevalence into adolescence, with more than 27% of 10 to 15 year olds living separately from their mothers (Cotton 2017). At older ages of adolescence, child non-residence may represent children sent to live with kin or may signal independent housing as part of the transition to adulthood. It should be noted, however, that adolescents in Nairobi slums have relatively delayed transitions out of the parental home, with only about 3% of adolescents living independently by age 15 and about 13% by age 18 (Beguy et al. 2011). Thus, child residence norms in the slum context may be impacted by high unemployment and rising housing costs, which may serve as a barrier to youth transitioning out of the parental home independently and may promote young adolescents moving to live with kin elsewhere. While recent studies suggest fostering occurs among mothers living in Nairobi's slums, the present study goes beyond measuring occurrence and explores the role of kin networks and relationships in the fostering of single mothers' offspring.

## **4. Data and methods**

We leverage multiple sources of data collected within Korogocho and Viwandani. First, we use innovative kinship network data collected in the Kinship Support Tree project (KST). This project gathered information on 462 focal children age 0 to 7 years living with a single mother in Korogocho in May to July 2015. A second wave of data was collected in January to February 2016, retaining 412 mothers. Detailed information was collected on all immediate family members of the focal child, including their biological father, siblings (full and half), and maternal and paternal grandparents, aunts, and uncles, regardless of whether they provided any support or whether they lived in the same household as the mother. This is a major strength of the KST for exploring fostering, as it explicitly sought to include non-residential kin, where most surveys focus solely on coresidential relatives. This is important given that fostering, by definition, entails children living with non-residential kin. Data collected on each relative includes survival status, age, location, and support for the focal child, such as childcare or financial or material support. The instrument and key findings about other types of kin support are described in detail elsewhere (Madhavan, Beguy, and Clark 2018; Clark et al. 2017; Madhavan et al. 2017). In addition to the focal child, data was collected on all siblings of the focal child, including their age, place of residence, and the type of union their mother had with that child's biological father if the child was a half-sibling to the focal child. The data collected on the focal children and their siblings allow us to explore factors associated with fostering for all children aged 0 to 15, including which kin care for fostered children and how single mothers' kin and romantic connections may relate to these arrangements.

We restrict our sample to children aged 0 to 15 years present in wave 2 who are not missing any of the dependent or independent variables. We focus on the second wave of data collection specifically, because all focal children were required to live with their mothers during initial data collection, a condition which was not in place in the second wave. From an initial sample of 952 reported children born to 412 mothers, we exclude 34 children who have died, 113 children aged 16 or older, and 64 children who are missing the dependent or any independent variable.<sup>5</sup> This results in an analytic sample of 741 children aged 0 to 15 born to 404 mothers.

Our dependent variable in quantitative analyses is a binary measure of child fostering, where children living in their mother's household are categorized as 'not fostered' and children living elsewhere are coded as 'fostered.' In this study we use the term 'child fostering' to refer to children living separately from their biological mothers. Though there is no single definition to describe fostering, we consider children in our

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<sup>5</sup> This includes 16 non-biological children residing with single mothers. Given that these children were not born from the sampled women's unions, they cannot be included due to a lack of data on union type at birth.

samples to be fostered if they live with any person other than their biological mother, including the small number who reside with fathers and/or step-mothers, in line with previous work suggesting children living with fathers and step-mothers should be considered fostered due to the likelihood of “differential treatment” (Bledsoe 1990: 85). It must be noted that for children in our quantitative data, we have little information on how mothers would describe these non-residential arrangements nor detailed measures of duration or motivation. Using this data on child residence, we provide descriptive characteristics of fostered children, including their reported caregiver and geographic location, and for focal children who moved between waves, the reason for the change in residence.

Our key independent variables are drawn from measures of single mothers’ kinship networks, which we refer to as kin network attributes. Specifically, we examine attributes including the size of kin networks, the geographic distribution of kin, the maternal and paternal composition of kin networks, and the emotional strength of these connections. The size of mothers’ kin networks may be relevant to fostering decisions because a larger number of kin may provide more opportunities for fostering. The size of kin networks is determined by counting the total number of kin that mothers report as living and age 16 or older. These kin may be able to foster-in young children as mothers are aware of their survival status. Mothers report between 0 and 20 kin (mean 7.5). Because kin residing in different locations may be more or less likely to provide certain types of support – for example, kin living far from Korogocho are unlikely to provide childcare but may foster – we explore variation in the number of kin who live in the slums versus kin who live outside the slum areas of Nairobi.<sup>6</sup> Mothers report an average of 3.4 kin in the slums (ranging from 0 to 17), including those who coreside with the mothers, and an average of 3.7 kin outside the slums (ranging from 0 to 19).

Given the complex nature of lineage and familial ties in Kenya, the availability and proximity of maternal versus paternal kin may have important implications for fostering. Maternal kin are those living, age 16 and older, who are reported as the child’s maternal grandmother, grandfather, aunt, or uncle. Paternal kin include the child’s biological father as well as the paternal grandmother, grandfather, aunt, or uncle, if they are age 16 or older and are known to be alive. Mothers report between 0 and 16 maternal kin, with an average of 4.7 maternal kin. The mean number of paternal kin is lower (2.4), ranging from 0 to 12, reflecting that single mothers’ awareness of their child’s paternal kin may be low. We also break down the number of maternal and paternal kin by location, which suggests the average number of maternal kin inside and outside the

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<sup>6</sup> Of the women’s reported 3,046 living kin aged 16 or older, the location could not be ascertained for approximately 5.7% (175 kin) due to missing or unknown place of residence. Thus, these kin are included in calculations of size of kin network and the number of maternal and paternal kin, but are excluded from counts of kin living within or outside the slums.

slums is similar (2.3 for both) while the mean number of paternal kin inside the slums is just 0.8 and the average number of paternal kin living elsewhere is 1.3. Kin members such as stepfathers, other relatives that cannot be categorized as maternal or paternal kin, and non-relatives (collectively less than 1% of all kin) are excluded from these categories, as are siblings who cannot be categorized as either maternal or paternal (collectively 3.5% of all kin).<sup>7</sup>

To explore closeness and relationship quality between single mothers and members of their kin network, we include a measure of the emotional support between mothers and kin. This variable takes mothers' response to three statements of closeness for each member of their kin network: 'I can talk to [kin name] about a personal issue that is bothering me;' '[Kin name] shares an affectionate, warm relationship with me;' and 'If there is a crisis for yourself, you can count on [kin name] to help you.' If mothers agree or somewhat agree with any of these statements, they are coded as 'receiving emotional support', while if they disagree or respond with 'Don't Know', they are coded as 'not receiving emotional support.' We test measures of total emotional support (mean 5.1 kin), number of kin providing emotional support in the slums (mean 2.8) and outside the slums (mean 2.2), and number of maternal (mean 4.1) and paternal (mean 0.7) kin providing emotional support.

We begin our quantitative analyses by exploring bivariate associations of fostering and key independent variables. Next, we describe the circumstances of fostered children. Our final quantitative analyses employ logistic regression to explore the association between fostering and single mothers' kin network attributes. We cluster data at the mother level to adjust for children sharing the same mother. Results of regression models are presented as odds ratios for ease of interpretation. We control for child and mother-level socio-demographic variables, such as child's age and gender, mother's age, ethnicity (Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, others), education (primary or less, secondary or more), employment status (unemployed versus employed), migrant status (born in Nairobi versus born outside Nairobi), household wealth quintile, and mother's number of children ever born. Due to the importance for children's lineage of the mother's relationship with the child's biological father, we also control for mother's union type at the child's birth, categorizing unions as 'married to biological father at birth' or 'never married to biological father,' which includes women who reported no relationship, a cohabiting unmarried relationship, or a non-cohabiting relationship with the father. Descriptive characteristics of the analytic sample are presented in Table 1.

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<sup>7</sup> Alternate models categorizing a child's siblings as maternal kin (results available upon request) were not substantively different to the models included in this article.

**Table 1: Descriptive characteristics in KST sample, by residence (n = 741)**

	Total	Not fostered	Fostered	P-value
	Percent or Mean	Percent or Mean	Percent or Mean	
<b>CHILD CHARACTERISTICS</b>				
<b>Child's age</b>	5.7	5.5	8.6	0.000
<b>Child's gender</b>				0.725
Male	49.7	49.5	52.2	
Female	50.3	50.5	47.8	
<b>MOTHER CHARACTERISTICS</b>				
<b>Mother's age</b>	30.2	30.1	31.4	0.251
<b>Mother's ethnicity</b>				0.001
Kikuyu	44.0	44.2	41.3	
Luhya	16.3	15.0	37.0	
Luo	20.1	20.6	13.0	
Other	19.6	20.3	8.7	
<b>Mother's education</b>				0.160
Primary or less	76.3	75.7	84.8	
Secondary or more	23.8	24.3	15.2	
<b>Mother's employment status</b>				0.004
Not working	27.8	28.5	8.7	
Working	72.7	71.5	91.3	
<b>Mother's wealth quintile</b>	2.9	2.9	2.1	0.000
<b>Mother's migrant status</b>				0.000
Born in Nairobi	59.7	61.6	30.4	
Born outside Nairobi	40.4	38.4	69.6	
<b>Mother's union type at child's birth</b>				0.336
Married to biological father	32.5	33.0	26.1	
Never married to biological father	67.5	67.1	73.9	
<b>Number of children ever born</b>	2.9	2.9	3.3	0.102
<b>KIN NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS</b>				
<b>Size and location of mother's kin networks</b>				
Total kin network	7.5	7.5	7.5	0.965
Network in slums	3.4	3.5	2.4	0.005
Network outside slums	3.7	3.6	4.6	0.040
Maternal kin network	4.7	4.7	4.8	0.850
Maternal kin network in slums	2.3	2.4	1.3	0.001
Maternal kin network outside slums	2.3	2.3	3.4	0.002
Paternal kin network	2.4	2.4	2.3	0.724
Paternal kin network in slums	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.951
Paternal kin network outside slums	1.3	1.3	1.1	0.391
<b>Emotional support</b>				
Total emotional support	5.1	5.1	4.7	0.381
Emotional support in slums	2.8	2.9	1.4	0.000
Emotional support outside slums	2.2	2.2	3.2	0.003
Maternal kin emotional support	4.1	4.1	4.1	0.967
Paternal kin emotional support	0.7	0.7	0.2	0.024
<b>N</b>	741	695 (93.8%)	46 (6.2%)	

To complement these survey data, we rely on qualitative data collected in Korogocho and Viwandani in 2011 and 2013. The broader study collected 84 in-depth interviews with women aged 15 and older. Here, we use data from 41 single mothers, including 9 who have never fostered children and 32 who have ever fostered children and were unmarried at the time they first fostered.<sup>8</sup> Descriptive characteristics of qualitative respondents are noted in Table 2. Using the NUHDSS database as a sampling frame, women were selected in the first round of interviews based on age (15–49). Based on emerging themes surrounding children’s living arrangements from the first round, women were selected in the second round based on having ever reported in the NUHDSS that they had a non-resident child. Thus, the majority of interviews in this paper are drawn from the second period of data collection in 2013. Interviews in both rounds focused on women’s experiences of migration, relationships, and childrearing. In the second round, further questions were added concerning fostered children, including questions on how decisions about fostering were made and who fostered children lived with. In this paper we highlight themes related to decisions about children’s living arrangements within larger kin networks, which kin members are chosen – or volunteer – to foster children, and how relationships between mothers and kin influence how and where children are fostered.

The interviews were conducted in Kiswahili by three trained female fieldworkers who resided in the community. Audio-recordings were transcribed and translated into English by bilingual translators. These transcripts were analyzed using MaxQDA, relying on multiple steps of analysis. Initial coding of the data relied on a deductive approach, with coding based on the interview guide. A second stage of coding involved an inductive approach, coding for themes that emerged through close reading of the data, and emphasized single mothers’ descriptions of children’s living arrangements outside their households. In the results we include quotations to demonstrate cases that characterize different experiences of fostering by mother’s union history and available kin support. We leverage the qualitative data to answer questions surrounding single mothers’ decision-making regarding fostering, and how their relationships with romantic partners and kin relate to where and with whom their fostered children live.

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<sup>8</sup> Of the total study sample of 84 respondents, 8 were childless women, 20 were married mothers who had never fostered, and 15 were married mothers who had fostered but had never been a single mother.



**Table 2: Descriptive characteristics of single mothers from qualitative sample (n = 41)**

	% or Mean	#
<b>Current marital status</b>		
Never married	12.2	5
Divorced/separated	29.3	12
Widowed	24.4	10
Remarried/reunited*	34.1	14
<b>Mother's age</b>	36.6	
<b>Number of children</b>	3.6	
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Kikuyu	26.8	11
Kamba	17.1	7
Luo	22.0	9
Luhya	17.1	7
Other	17.1	7
<b>Mother's education</b>		
None/unknown	9.8	4
Primary	65.9	27
Secondary or more	24.4	10
<b>Migrant</b>	85.4	35
<b>Timing of child fostering</b>		
Never fostered	22.0	9
Past	29.3	12
Present	39.0	16
Past and present	9.8	4
<b>Which kin cares for fostered child</b>		
Maternal kin	68.8	22
Paternal kin	15.6	5
Both or unspecified	15.6	5

Note: \*This category includes mothers (10) who experienced a birth, later married a new partner, and fostered their children prior to or alongside their remarriage, as well as a small number of mothers (4) who fostered when separated from their children's biological father, and later reunited with their spouse. In some cases, reunions occurred following the birth of another partner's child. All mothers were single when initiating fostering arrangements.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Descriptive characteristics of children in the KST sample

Approximately 6% of children in the KST sample are fostered at time of survey. Fostered children are, on average, older than coresident children, though there are no differences by child's gender. Fostered children are more likely to have single mothers who are employed, have lower household wealth, or are migrants to Nairobi than their coresident counterparts. Interestingly, there are no differences in child residence by

whether mothers were married to the biological father at birth or never married. In examining differences in the kin networks of single mothers by child residence, we note that fostered children's mothers have more kin living outside the slums and fewer kin within the slums than coresident children, though there is no difference in the size of their total kin networks. Having more kin nearby may decrease dependence on fostering. Coresident and fostered children's mothers have similar numbers of maternal kin, but again we find more maternal kin elsewhere and fewer maternal kin in the slums for fostered versus coresident children. There are no differences in the size or location of paternal kin networks by child residence. When looking at kin providing emotional support, fostered children's mothers have fewer kin in the slums giving emotional support but a larger number of kin outside the slums that provide emotional support, and their mothers report fewer close relationships with paternal kin.

In Table 3 we provide more detailed information on the living arrangements of fostered children in the KST, including both focal children and their siblings. Fostered children reside throughout Kenya, with the majority living in rural Kenya (58.7%) and in other urban areas (15.2%) or non-slum areas of Nairobi (15.2%). Interestingly, a number of fostered children reside in Korogocho or other slums (10.9%), geographically near to mothers and in similar slum conditions. Details of the particular circumstances of fostering beyond location and caregiver were collected only for the small number of focal children who transitioned out of their mother's household between waves. While limited in scope, this additional context, along with the qualitative results that follow, illuminates some of the reasons that children leave their mother's home. The primary motivations behind fostering were single mothers' inability to provide financially, kin requesting the child, a lack of childcare in the slums, or a combination of these reasons. Five of the nine fostered focal children were expected to live elsewhere for a year or more, while other mothers were not sure of duration or intended a shorter separation.

**Table 3: Characteristics of fostered children in the KST sample (n = 46)**

	%
<b>Caregiver of fostered child</b>	
Biological mother*	6.5
Step-mother/biological father	6.5
Maternal grandmother	34.8
Paternal grandmother	10.9
Maternal aunt or uncle	28.3
Paternal aunt or uncle	4.4
Non-relative	8.7
<b>Fostered child's location</b>	
Korogocho	8.7
Other Nairobi slum	2.2
Nairobi Non-slum	15.2
Other urban Kenya	15.2
Rural Kenya	58.7
<b>N</b>	<b>46</b>

Note: \*Though these children are reported as receiving care from their mother, they do not coreside in the same household nor in the same community; thus, they are categorized as non-resident fostered children.

## 5.2 How are kin network attributes associated with fostering?

We turn now to our analytic models, which explore the association of size of kin networks, kin location, number of maternal and paternal kin, and emotional support with the odds of children of single mothers being fostered.

### 5.2.1 Size of kin networks and location of kin

Table 4 shows the relationship between fostering and size and location of single mothers' kin networks. In the case of kin network size, controlling only for child age and gender (Model 1), we find no association between the size of kin networks and fostering. In Model 2 we add additional maternal characteristics. Few of the control variables concerning mother and child characteristics predict fostering. Each year of child's age increases the odds of fostering, while having a mother living in a household with relatively lower poverty decreases the odds of a child being fostered. In line with expectations that migrant women may have greater access to kin elsewhere, children of migrant mothers are more than three times as likely to be fostered than children of non-migrants. Though we may expect that the relationship between biological parents would be important in decisions about children's living arrangements, we do not find an

association between the relationship single mothers had with their child's father and fostering.

**Table 4: Odds of child fostering by size and location of kin networks (n = 741)**

	TOTAL KIN								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	OR	SE	P-value	OR	SE	P-value	OR	SE	P-value
<b>KIN NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS</b>									
<b>Size of kin network</b>	1.0	0.1	0.831	1.1	0.1	0.324			
<b>Size of kin network in slums</b>							0.9	0.1	0.432
<b>Size of kin network outside slums</b>							1.1	0.1	0.162
<b>CHILD CHARACTERISTICS</b>									
<b>Child's age</b>	1.2	0.0	0.000	1.2	0.0	0.000	1.2	0.0	0.000
<b>Child's gender (male ref.)</b>	0.9	0.3	0.693	0.9	0.3	0.815	0.9	0.3	0.741
<b>MOTHER CHARACTERISTICS</b>									
<b>Mother's age</b>				0.9	0.0	0.118	0.9	0.0	0.070
<b>Mother's ethnicity</b>									
Kikuyu (ref.)									
Luhya				1.4	0.7	0.550	1.4	0.7	0.538
Luo				0.5	0.3	0.204	0.5	0.3	0.261
Other				0.3	0.2	0.104	0.3	0.2	0.114
<b>Mother's education</b>									
Primary or less (ref.)									
Some secondary or more				1.1	0.7	0.915	1.0	0.6	0.983
<b>Mother's employment</b>									
Unemployed (ref.)									
Employed				2.0	1.2	0.282	1.7	1.1	0.393
<b>Mother's household wealth quintile</b>				0.6	0.1	0.006	0.6	0.1	0.007
<b>Mother's migrant status</b>									
Born in Nairobi (ref.)									
Born outside Nairobi				3.9	2.1	0.012	3.3	1.8	0.035
<b>Mother's union type at child's birth</b>									
Married to biological father (ref.)									
Never married to biological father				2.0	0.7	0.055	2.2	0.8	0.029
<b>Mother's number of children ever born</b>				1.0	0.1	0.731	1.0	0.1	0.939
<b>Pseudo R2</b>		0.1			0.2			0.2	
<b>N (children)</b>		741			741			741	
<b>N (mothers)</b>		404			404			404	

In Model 3 we explore how the size and geographic location of kin networks are related to fostering. After controlling for child and mother characteristics, we no longer see an association between the size of kin networks inside the slums. We find that children whose parents were never married are more than twice as likely to be fostered

than children of formerly married parents, potentially due to maternal kin requests for these children or greater willingness of kin to support children who may have less access to certain forms of support based on their parents' more informal relationship. Adjusting for location of kin reduces the association between mother's migrant status and fostering, likely because migrant mothers are more likely to live farther from kin and may have more kin located outside the slums than women born within Korogocho, whose kin networks may be more heavily concentrated nearby.

### 5.2.2 Maternal and paternal kin

In our next set of analyses in Table 5, we examine maternal and paternal kin network size and location. Having a higher number of maternal or paternal kin overall does not increase or decrease the odds that children will be fostered (Model 4).<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the location of maternal kin (Model 5) and paternal kin (Model 6) does not appear to play a role in these arrangements.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 5: Odds of child fostering by size and location of maternal and paternal kin networks (n = 741)**

	TOTAL KIN			MATERNAL KIN			PATERNAL KIN		
	Model 4			Model 5			Model 6		
	OR	SE	P-value	OR	SE	P-value	OR	SE	P-value
KIN NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS									
<b>Maternal kin network</b>	1.1	0.1	0.341						
<b>Paternal kin network</b>	1.0	0.1	0.590						
<b>Kin network in slums</b>				0.9	0.1	0.283	1.1	0.1	0.316
<b>Kin network outside slums</b>				1.2	0.1	0.080	1.0	0.1	0.751
CHILD CHARACTERISTICS									
<b>Child's age</b>	1.2	0.0	0.000	1.2	0.0	0.000	1.2	0.0	0.000
<b>Child's gender (male ref.)</b>	0.9	0.3	0.816	0.9	0.3	0.768	1.0	0.3	0.938
MOTHER CHARACTERISTICS									
<b>Mother's age</b>	0.9	0.0	0.129	0.9	0.0	0.058	0.9	0.0	0.170
<b>Mother's ethnicity</b>									
Kikuyu (ref)									
Luhya	1.3	0.7	0.569	1.3	0.6	0.636	1.4	0.7	0.536
Luo	0.5	0.3	0.207	0.5	0.3	0.234	0.5	0.3	0.241
Other	0.3	0.2	0.099	0.3	0.2	0.077	0.4	0.3	0.144

<sup>9</sup> Additional sensitivity analyses with models run separately for number of maternal kin and number of paternal kin do not produce substantively different results.

<sup>10</sup> When running separate models of kin networks in slums and kin networks outside the slums, a larger maternal kin network outside the slums was associated with higher odds of fostering, consistent with the bivariate results in Table 1.

**Table 5: (Continued)**

	TOTAL KIN			MATERNAL KIN			PATERNAL KIN		
	Model 4			Model 5			Model 6		
	OR	SE	P-value	OR	SE	P-value	OR	SE	P-value
<b>Mother's education</b>									
Primary or less (ref)									
Some secondary or more	1.1	0.7	0.901	1.0	0.6	0.978	1.1	0.7	0.862
<b>Mother's employment</b>									
Unemployed (ref)									
Employed	2.0	1.3	0.293	1.7	1.1	0.387	2.1	1.3	0.238
<b>Mother's household wealth quintile</b>	0.6	0.1	0.005	0.6	0.1	0.008	0.7	0.1	0.009
<b>Mother's migrant status</b>									
Born in Nairobi (ref)									
Born outside Nairobi	3.8	2.1	0.013	2.9	1.7	0.065	3.8	2.0	0.011
<b>Mother's union type at child's birth</b>									
Married to biological father (ref)									
Never married to biological father	2.0	0.7	0.052	2.2	0.8	0.020	1.9	0.7	0.076
<b>Number of children ever born</b>	1.0	0.1	0.890	1.0	0.1	0.908	1.0	0.1	0.768
<b>Pseudo R2</b>		0.2			0.2			0.2	
<b>N (children)</b>		741			741			741	
<b>N (mothers)</b>		404			404			404	

### 5.2.3 Emotional support from kin

In our final set of analyses (Table 6) we explore the relationship between child fostering and the number of kin providing emotional support to single mothers. In Model 7 we find no association between fostering and the total number of kin providing emotional support. When examining the location of kin providing emotional support (Model 8), we note that having a larger number of kin who provide emotional support within the slums is associated with lower odds of a child being fostered.<sup>11</sup> In our final model (Model 9), which looks at provision of emotional support by maternal and paternal kin, we find no relationship between fostering and the number of maternal kin offering emotional support; however, having a higher number of paternal kin who give emotional support is associated with lower odds of fostering for children of single mothers. This may suggest that having supportive connections to paternal kin after a union dissolution may in fact encourage single mothers to coreside with children or may limit patrilineal demands for children.

<sup>11</sup> When running separate models for number of kin providing emotional support inside and outside the slums, a larger number of kin outside the slums who offer emotional support is associated with higher odds of fostering, consistent with bivariate results in Table 1.

**Table 6: Odds of child fostering by size and location of emotional support in kin networks (n = 741)**

	TOTAL KIN								
	Model 7			Model 8			Model 9		
	OR	SE	P-value	OR	SE	P-value	OR	SE	P-value
<b>KIN NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS</b>									
<b>Total emotional support</b>	1.0	0.1	0.932						
<b>Emotional support in slums</b>				0.8	0.1	0.028			
<b>Emotional support outside slums</b>				1.1	0.1	0.128			
<b>Maternal kin emotional support</b>							1.1	0.1	0.198
<b>Paternal kin emotional support</b>							0.5	0.2	0.023
<b>CHILD CHARACTERISTICS</b>									
<b>Child's age</b>	1.2	0.0	0.000	1.2	0.0	0.000	1.2	0.0	0.000
<b>Child's gender (male ref.)</b>	1.0	0.3	0.896	0.9	0.3	0.840	0.9	0.3	0.757
<b>MOTHER CHARACTERISTICS</b>									
<b>Mother's age</b>	0.9	0.0	0.133	0.9	0.0	0.047	0.9	0.0	0.074
<b>Mother's ethnicity</b>									
Kikuyu (ref)									
Luhya	1.4	0.7	0.503	1.2	0.6	0.767	1.2	0.6	0.653
Luo	0.5	0.3	0.235	0.5	0.3	0.252	0.4	0.2	0.128
Other	0.4	0.3	0.159	0.3	0.2	0.087	0.3	0.2	0.110
<b>Mother's education</b>									
Primary or less (ref)									
Some secondary or more	1.1	0.7	0.896	1.0	0.6	0.986	1.1	0.7	0.917
<b>Mother's employment</b>									
Unemployed (ref)									
Employed	2.1	1.3	0.247	1.6	1.0	0.475	2.0	1.3	0.272
<b>Mother's household wealth quintile</b>	0.7	0.1	0.009	0.7	0.1	0.012	0.6	0.1	0.003
<b>Mother's migrant status</b>									
Born in Nairobi (ref)									
Born outside Nairobi	3.8	2.0	0.011	2.8	1.6	0.071	4.3	2.2	0.006
<b>Mother's union type at child's birth</b>									
Married to biological father (ref)									
Never married to biological father	1.9	0.7	0.070	2.0	0.7	0.047	1.6	0.6	0.212
<b>Number of children ever born</b>	1.0	0.1	0.748	1.0	0.1	0.757	1.0	0.1	0.891
<b>Pseudo R2</b>		0.2			0.2			0.2	
<b>N (children)</b>		741			741			741	
<b>N (mothers)</b>		404			404			404	

### 5.3 Which kin care for fostered children?

Among children who are fostered, single mothers primarily rely on maternal kin. In the KST a small number of women report that they continued to be their fostered child's

primary caregiver despite living separately (see Table 3).<sup>12</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common caregiver for fostered children is the maternal grandmother (34.8%), while only 10.9% live with paternal grandmothers. Fostered children also more frequently reside with maternal than paternal aunts and uncles (28.3% versus 4.4%), and occasionally with non-relatives (8.7%) and biological fathers and step-mothers (6.5%). Maternal kin thus appear to play an important role in caring for fostered children, despite virtually all ethnic groups in Kenya practicing patrilineal descent. In the next subsection we explore why maternal kin are so frequently relied on to foster-in children of single mothers.

#### **5.4 The role of maternal kin**

In the qualitative sample the majority of women also report their children's caregivers as maternal grandmothers, aunts, and uncles (see Table 2), highlighting again the important role that the woman's own relatives play in fostering her children. Women whose children lived with their mothers or siblings often spoke of warm connections between themselves, their children, and those caring for their children, describing arrangements as comfortable and supportive. This heavy reliance on maternal rather than paternal kin may be a reflection of the mother's relationship with the child's father at birth and how embedded she is in the father's kin network. We identify multiple cases where this occurs among mothers with non-marital births and those who had informal 'come-we-stay' unions with their child's father, described below. In other cases, even traditionally married women turned to maternal kin upon union dissolution when relationships with paternal kin were acrimonious. These arrangements with maternal kin can be categorized into three primary, sometimes overlapping motivations for fostering: protection of children, traditions and obligations surrounding childrearing, and kin willingness to foster.

##### **5.4.1 Protection and support of children**

In some cases, maternal grandmothers requested to foster-in children as they were protective of grandchildren with new step-fathers, as was the case with Esther and her

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<sup>12</sup> This may represent an important distinction between coresidence, caregiving, and financial responsibility, as a number of respondents in the qualitative sample described themselves as responsible for a child who lived in a different household. One example is Yvonne, who left several of her children with her mother-in-law and explained "I was *providing* for her [my oldest daughter] but my mother-in-law took *care* of her" (authors' emphasis).



son. Esther explained her reliance on her maternal kin who fostered her son for seven years, first the maternal grandmother and later the maternal great-grandfather:

*I gave birth before getting married and so my mother felt that my [new] husband could frustrate [my son].<sup>13</sup> And so she took him and stayed with him up to 2005 when she died... My mother [decided]... [My son came to live with me] in 2006 because he stayed with my grandfather for a year before I took him.*

Esther's mother strongly encouraged her to leave the child at home indefinitely, as Esther noted: "I tell you that even now if my mother could be alive, even now this boy could still be with her..." Esther's mother was concerned about her grandson and his lack of biological connection to Esther's new husband, which she feared may have resulted in poor treatment. This was a common sentiment expressed by single mothers concerning maternal kin's desire to care for children born outside of marriage. Other women also sent children away or left them behind when marrying in order to protect children from previous unions. Nadine's husband left her following the birth of her first child, and she then had her daughter with a different partner whom she did not marry. When Nadine's husband later asked her to reunite and move to Nairobi with him, it was conditional on leaving her daughter behind. Nadine explained, "Unfortunately I cannot bring her to Nairobi because she is not my husband's biological child. She is a constant reminder to him of the indiscretion that I had with another man." Women's relationships – or lack thereof – with their children's father may dictate whether children are fostered and who cares for them, particularly when mothers marry new partners who may refuse non-biological children or whom maternal kin may distrust with their descendants. Mothers like Nadine may have sought help from kin both to protect children from stepfathers and to preserve the benefits gained by marriage to a new partner.

Some mothers sought assistance from other maternal kin, in particular aunts and uncles, who were sometimes able to provide financially for fostered children after the mother's relationship ended and financial burdens increased. For example, when Charity separated from her husband when her twins were two years old, she "took them home" to live with her brother, the maternal uncle, where they stayed until they were about age seven, when Charity and her husband reunited. Charity specified that her relationship with her husband was a cohabiting union without any dowry, which may have influenced her decision to take the children to their maternal uncle. Her brother's relative wealth may have also served as an important reason to send the children to his home, as Charity explained her mother encouraged her to do "[b]ecause I didn't have

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<sup>13</sup> The word 'frustrate' is translated from the Kiswahili verb *kukataa*, which can also be translated to mean 'reject' or 'refuse.'

source of income” after the separation. Charity noted her brother had the financial means to care for her children, saying: “[With my brother] they could dress decently, and eat well and regularly.” Similarly, Halima’s sister requested that Halima send her youngest daughter home after the death of Halima’s husband. Halima indicated that she allowed the child to live with her sister for more than five years because she “was not financially well off” at the time. Leveraging the close connections of brothers and sisters appears to provide an important option for fostering when single mothers have few or weak bonds with other kin, particularly when these maternal aunts and uncles have the financial resources to support children.

#### 5.4.2 Traditions and obligations

Traditions about when a new partner should care for children from a previous union, particularly obligations surrounding payment of dowry to maternal kin, were discussed in multiple interviews as the reason children born before marriage lived with maternal grandparents and other maternal kin. Yvonne, whose two eldest daughters were born during informal relationships, explained that her mother told her she must leave the children when Yvonne moved to live with her new husband, saying “The decision lay in my mother’s hands.” She clarified:

*It is not good for a woman to go to a new home with her child. She must first go and see that the new home is a suitable place for the child to live. The woman may then go back to her mother’s home with her husband and convince the mother that they want to and are capable of living with the child.*

Ruth, a mother of three, also noted the role of tradition when determining where her children should live. Her two children from her previous union had lived with their maternal grandmother since Ruth moved to Nairobi to work five years earlier, and remained in the grandmother’s care even after Ruth married and had another child, signs of Ruth’s stability. The reason for this arrangement was, in Ruth’s words:

*[B]ecause our traditions and cultural practices as Kamba demand that when you marry a woman with children, you must first pay dowry before you can be allowed to take the children. So it is my parents who must be with the children until culture will have been honored...*

At the time of interview, three years after she married, Ruth described her marriage to her children’s step-father as a “cohabiting marriage arrangement” with no

bridewealth exchanged to claim rights over the children; thus her children continued to live outside Ruth's household despite her desire to live with her children and her husband's acceptance of her children.

Susan, whose oldest three children resided with their maternal grandmother, described a similar situation that arose when she separated from her husband:

*Susan: Let me say that ever since I left my husband, the children have been living with my mother most of the time.*

*Interviewer: So your husband was not staying with them during the period that you separated?*

*Susan: There are very many issues in a home. My husband is only biological father to my third-born child. He is not [the other children's] father. So I couldn't leave children who are not his with him or his [the husband's] father when I was going back to my parents' home.*

Susan described her marriage as 'come-we-stay' without dowry or involvement of kin, which meant her children were Susan's family's responsibility when she left her husband. Asked why she left the children in the care of their grandmother rather than other relatives, Susan suggested that she felt other kin may not welcome supporting her children, saying "I liked my mother, and more so, other relatives have their families to take care of." Thus, women's reliance on certain maternal kin may be a function both of cultural expectations about who children belong with and kin willingness to care for children.

### **5.4.3 Kin willingness**

Mothers who were never married or who had premarital births and later married a different partner most often described arrangements where their parents, siblings, or extended maternal kin cared for children, primarily due to their willingness to take in children. However, not all maternal kin were equally willing to help, as Grace explained. Grace, a never-married mother of two, sent her oldest son, now aged 16, to live with her mother when he was four years old. Asked why she made the decision for her son to live with his maternal grandmother, Grace first said "always home is best," before explaining why she did not ask other, potentially younger, relatives to take her son:

*They [other relatives] couldn't take him easily. They would ask me if they sent me to get children to give them to bring up. But my mother cannot complain. She has the motherly feeling, and she is comfortably staying with him.*

Grace made it clear that her mother was the ideal choice for caregiver, as she would accept taking her grandson whereas other kin may have refused to help. Grace suggested that other relatives would view caring for her child as a burden while her mother's "motherly feeling" made her less likely to complain about the arrangement. This points to an important element of these arrangements, as real or perceived unwillingness on the part of certain maternal kin may play a significant role in the reliance on maternal grandmothers in particular. If women's own mothers are viewed as being unable to complain about fostering-in grandchildren while their siblings or more distant relatives may refuse, single mothers may bypass these other kin and only make the request to foster to their own mothers. Paternal kin were not an option for either of Grace's children, as she had never told either partner about her pregnancies, saying "I don't want them [the fathers] to disturb me by asking for their children." This permitted Grace to enact her own rights to children as a never-married woman, allowing her to transfer her child to her maternal kin as she saw fit.

Even women who were married to their child's father often reported their child's caregiver to be a maternal grandmother, aunt, or uncle when their marriage ended in widowhood or divorce. Maternal kin stepped in when biological fathers expressed no desire to care for children following union dissolution. Cecilia, a mother of four, relied first on her mother and later on her brother to care for her children after she divorced her husband and migrated to Nairobi to work in the 1990s. Her youngest daughter, a baby when Cecilia left her, was now an adolescent and had lived with her maternal uncle for more than a decade. Cecilia noted that this arrangement was her "own idea and decision" but her family encouraged her to leave her child behind, saying "my mother and brother advised me to leave her at home so that I could have enough time to work for pay..." Cecilia preferred this arrangement to relying on her ex-husband or his family to care for her children, noting "It [fostering] is very good with me because ever since I left that place, he [my ex-husband] doesn't even ask about how the child is doing..."

A breakdown of relationships between mothers and their husband's kin following divorce or the husband's death was not uncommon, and also often served as the reason children resided with maternal rather than paternal kin. Agnes, a mother of four, described the circumstances that led to sending her three oldest children to their maternal grandmother after Agnes' husband's death soured her relationship with the husband's family. She explained how her husband's kin treated her after his death: "You know Luos. If you lost your husband, they have so many stories... My father-in-law

used to accuse me that I was the one who killed his son.” The severe strain on Agnes’ relationships with her husband’s kin pushed her to leave their home and bring her children to her mother. She described the decision to leave her children with her mother when she migrated to Nairobi for work as her choice, but only her mother’s willingness made it possible:

Interviewer: *What was the reaction of your mother [to you bringing the children to her]?*

Agnes: *She told me not to suffer while I have my hands.*

Agnes’ mother described herself as Agnes’ ‘hands,’ reminding her that kin play important roles in supporting children, that children are not raised by one hand alone. Agnes explained that while she had brothers-in-law – those who, among the Luo, would traditionally support children after a father’s death – she could not depend on them to take in her children because “[t]hey were not concerned with the children.” Such tensions in relationships with children’s paternal kin meant that even for women who married in a traditional manner, including the exchange of dowry, paternal kin were not always willing or trusted to care for children.

### **5.5 ‘Their own paternal home’**

A small number of women reported children residing with paternal kin, most frequently grandmothers and aunts as well as biological fathers themselves. These arrangements with paternal kin caring for children might be categorized as stemming from traditional expectations about paternal lineage and desires to support these children, as we saw with maternal kin, or from involuntary arrangements made without mothers’ consent, which was not reported among single mothers whose children stayed with maternal kin. Few single mothers reported positive relationships that made paternal kin a viable option to foster children. Those who did were widows, including some whose traditional marriages involved bridewealth, which may have cemented their children’s place in paternal kin networks. For example, Catherine brought her two young children to live with their paternal grandmother after her husband died in 2005. She felt she could not support her children financially after her husband’s death, and her mother-in-law was her first – and perhaps only – choice as caregiver: “I had to take them to their home. That is where I am married. I couldn’t take them to anybody else; the children have their own paternal home.” Catherine’s reference to her children’s “home” indicates that this is where she believed her children belonged, given her husband’s rights to her children. As she was unable to support her children alone, Catherine was able to activate

her children's claims to paternal kin support by bringing them to their paternal kin. Though Nancy's union was 'come-we-stay' and no dowry had been paid, Nancy sent her son to live with the child's paternal kin when her husband died. Despite her informal union with her son's father, Nancy's relationship with her husband's relatives was described as positive specifically because of their willingness to care for her child: "I don't see it [our relationship] as bad because when my husband died, they took the child to be under their care because I could not provide for all his needs." Thus, in situations like Nancy's, where the child's paternal relatives actively seek involvement and desire to care for children, regardless of official claims to children, these kin may provide an additional network and source of support for single mothers.

The arrangements of some of the women whose children lived with paternal kin were described as contentious or involuntary on their part, but desired strongly by paternal relatives. Mothers like Bernadette described their children as "taken" by their fathers to be raised by paternal kin. In Bernadette's case, she was able to keep in occasional contact with her oldest son who lived with his father, while for Wendy a similar scenario resulted in a complete severing of her relationship with her son. After Wendy left her husband, she first brought her son to live with his maternal grandmother, but her former husband later took the child to live with a paternal aunt. Wendy explained:

*The father came and cheated my mother and stole the child...<sup>14</sup> I did not want him to take the child... He said that he was picking up the child and would bring him back... Then the moment the child went, he was never returned to me.*

In such cases, paternal claims on children may be enacted when mothers face financial difficulties or remarry after union dissolution, even when mothers would never describe these kin as potential sources of support. It is clear, however, that the majority of single mothers strongly prefer maternal kin, particularly maternal grandmothers, to foster-in children due to perceived warmth and willingness, which are less frequently attributed to fathers and paternal kin.

## **5.6 The role of kin support in deciding whether or not to foster**

As is clear from our quantitative analyses, many single mothers do not currently foster-out their children, despite living in slum conditions and experiencing union dissolution. We turn to our qualitative data to explore the coresidential living arrangements of single

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<sup>14</sup> The word 'cheated' is translated from the Kiswahili verb *kudanganya*, which can also mean 'deceived.'

mothers and their children, particularly how women's former romantic unions and relationships with kin may influence this decision. It should be noted that due to the cross-sectional nature of the analyses, some of these coresiding single mothers may foster-out children in the future as their circumstances change.

Many of the coresiding single mothers, while not always explicitly discussing help with childrearing, noted close relationships with maternal kin, often living with or near their mothers or siblings. These positive strong connections to maternal kin and a lack of patrilineal rights to children may have helped some single mothers to choose not to foster after union dissolution. None of the single mothers coresiding with all their children mentioned ongoing or positive relationships with their child's paternal kin. For mothers who left relationships, active and explicit resistance to paternal claims were sometimes necessary to keep children in the woman's custody. Leyla, whose relationship with her husband was volatile and took place without the permission of her family, had to demand her rights to her two-year-old twins when she left her husband. Leyla's ex-partner refused to let her take her children until Leyla involved local authorities and invoked her rights as a woman who had never formally married. Leyla explained:

*It was just fighting. He was refusing with the children. So every day we would go to the Chief – lots of back and forth. He would leave the children with his mother... So I told them the children were not theirs and that's when they left them.*

Leyla took her children to her own parents' compound, where she supported her family through commercial sex work. This employment, along with maternal kin support within Korogocho including childcare, allowed Leyla to coreside with her children without turning to kin elsewhere. Leyla was not alone in using sex work and pooled maternal kin resources to support coresidence with children, as two other formerly married mothers with coresident children reported the same, but these strategies were not discussed by any of the single mothers with fostered children. Interestingly, Leyla was the only coresiding single mother who explicitly brought up the potential to foster-out her children.<sup>15</sup>

Other single mothers reported living with or near their own kin and little connection with their children's paternal kin, both of which may have encouraged coresidence with children. Both Helen, a widowed mother of four, and Teresa, a divorced mother of five, suggested poor relationships with their husband's relatives

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<sup>15</sup> Nearly all the coresiding mothers were interviewed in the first round of data collection, which did not focus explicitly on fostering, as interviews did in the second round. As a result, those coresiding with their children were not specifically asked if they had considered fostering or would like to foster their children.

meant that these kin were not part of their kin networks. Helen noted that she “cannot claim my husband’s home as my own” and further explained that her mother-in-law never accepted her and her husband had not paid a dowry or built her a home in his village, resulting in her living with her children and some of her siblings’ families in the slums instead. Teresa described a forced marriage that was never formalized. Teresa’s children lived with her partly because she had no family of her own to rely on and she did not maintain a relationship with her husband’s kin, saying “he never paid dowry and never discussed my marriage [with kin].” This lack of formalization, coupled with her parents’ deaths when Teresa was young, left Teresa with no kin support nearby to turn to in order to raise her children, nor any kin outside the slums to foster-in children. Consequently, for some single mothers, coresidence may have been the only option available due to a lack of kin support from both the maternal and paternal lines, while for others, coresiding was a deliberate choice.

## **6. Discussion**

Single mothers living in slums face the daunting challenge of trying to care for their children while also financially supporting them. As a result, it seems likely that single mothers would call on kin to assist. Prior research shows that kin often do help single mothers, although not all single mothers receive financial or childcare support from kin (Clark et al. 2017). In the absence of such support, single mothers may turn to kin to foster children. However, little is known about single mothers’ decision to foster, or about which kin are most likely to foster-in the children of single mothers.

In our study we explored two questions about the fostering arrangements of single mothers in slum contexts in Nairobi, Kenya. First, we examined the role of kin network attributes in fostering arrangements, including kin network size, location, type, and the quality of relationships between mothers and kin. Second, we explored which kin cared for fostered children, paying particular attention to single mothers’ union history with their children’s fathers and reliance on maternal versus paternal kin. We contribute to the existing body of literature on kinship and child fostering in sub-Saharan Africa by examining fostering among single mothers in Nairobi’s slums, specifically focusing on single mothers’ kinship networks and how kin network attributes relate to caring for fostered children. By incorporating qualitative data with unique kinship support data collected in the same slum contexts, we highlight both the association between fostering and certain kin network attributes and how single mothers’ romantic and kin relationships support these living arrangements for children.

Both our quantitative and qualitative findings suggested a strong reliance on maternal versus paternal kin as caregivers of fostered children. The majority of fostered



children in both samples resided with maternal kin, most frequently with maternal grandmothers, aunts, and uncles. There was a greater dependence on maternal kin, regardless of women's prior relationship status with the child's father. This runs contrary to our expectations that type of union, particularly whether it was formalized as a marriage, might play a role in promoting reliance on paternal, rather than maternal, kin. Single mothers suggested preferences for their own kin due to stronger connections and warmer relationships, as well as key attributes of maternal kin such as the desire to protect children and the willingness to care for children. In line with a linked lives perspective highlighting the interconnectedness of the lives of mother, children, and kin, single mothers' relationships with their child's father at the time of birth and the importance of respecting traditions surrounding lineage and legitimacy played a vital role in women's reliance on maternal kin in the qualitative results, though type of union was not predictive of fostering in most of our regression findings. Mothers in informal 'come-we-stay' unions and those who experienced strained relationships with paternal kin following union dissolution frequently relied on maternal kin to care for children, particularly when no bridewealth had been paid and no lineage claims were made on children. Single mothers who lacked connections to paternal kin also made use of their nearby maternal kin for coresidence and receiving support, which could help avoid fostering altogether. Conversely, in the qualitative findings, we find that the relatively small group of single mothers whose children lived with paternal kin were often those whose unions entailed elements of legitimacy for children. Thus, certain patrilineal responsibilities toward children, coupled with positive relationships with a former partner's kin, may offer paternal kin as an important option for fostering among single mothers. However, this was not supported in our quantitative findings, which suggest supportive relationships between paternal kin and single mothers may reduce fostering, possibly indicating that emotionally supportive paternal kin provide other kinds of support to assist single mothers. Indeed, close relationships between single mothers and their children's paternal kin following union dissolution may result in fewer of the patrilineal demands for children noted in the qualitative findings, where single mothers were pushed into giving children to paternal kin and children were taken without the mothers' consent, often as a result of women entering new unions or facing financial distress in the slums. Overall, the lower reliance on paternal kin may signal a shift toward matrilineality, even in a context where paternal kin have traditionally played a substantial role in the lives of legitimated children, as has been noted in research on sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere (Jackson 2015; Oleke, Blystad, and Rekdal 2005; Nyambedha, Wandibba, and Aagaard-Hansen 2003). Additionally, single mothers may seek fostering arrangements with their own kin in order to maintain better and stronger relationships with their fostered children. Maternal kin may be more willing to facilitate regular contact between mothers and fostered children than paternal kin, who may have

a contentious relationship with the mother or hold more firmly to traditional patrilineal expectations about where children belong that may inhibit strong connections between mother and child (Cotton and Beguy 2021).

Our regression results suggest that having a larger overall kin network, or even a higher number of maternal or paternal kin, is not associated with fostering, nor does the location of a single mother's kin members appear to influence the likelihood of fostering. However, our findings do suggest that the provision of emotional support by certain kin may play an important role in reducing fostering. In particular, our findings suggest that having more emotionally supportive kin nearby in the slums may provide single mothers with important support that facilitates coresidence instead of fostering. The emotional support provided by paternal kin, though exceptionally rare, similarly may provide single mothers' assistance other than fostering.

This study makes a number of key contributions and suggests areas for future research; however, some limitations should be noted. First, the design of the KST, where focal children were required to coreside with mothers in the first round of data collection, presents important issues of selectivity. This may limit our full understanding of the fostering of children of single mothers, as the sampling strategy explicitly excluded single mothers who were already fostering-out all of their children under age 8. In addition, the sampling strategy included only single mothers with at least one child under age 8, meaning we are not capturing the fostering of single mothers whose children are all 8 years of age or older. This may result in underestimates of total fostering by single mothers in the slums, given that previous studies suggest fostering increases with age. Furthermore, the requirement that focal children coreside in the first round means that while we are able to assess both long-term and recent fostering for the focal child's siblings, we can only capture recent fostering for the focal child. A longer view may provide greater understanding of the movement of young children in and out of their mother's household. Second, fostering may be different for married versus single mothers, who are the focus of our study. While our findings provide important evidence of fostering among single mothers, married mothers may rely on two incomes and wider support from both their partners and partners' kin, reducing the need to foster. In addition, married women may have less reason to rely on maternal kin, and in fact may no longer have claims to maternal resources and support after marriage (Kariuki and Nelson 2006). Third, the focus on single mothers residing in slums means we cannot use these findings to understand fostering among mothers in non-slum areas. Mothers residing in rural communities or non-slum urban areas may rely less on fostering or choose different kin than mothers in slums. Finally, our regression results relating to paternal kin should be interpreted with caution, as the KST was designed to only collect data on paternal kin of the focal child. While these paternal kin represent the paternal kin of the majority of our sample, we do not have paternal kin data for approximately

16% of children. Models restricted to children with full paternal kin data are not substantively different from models including the full sample, but it is possible that mothers receive support from the paternal kin of their other children that we are not able to capture in these analyses.

Overall, our study answers important questions about child fostering and kinship in Kenya. Our work contributes to a growing body of research on fostering, particularly in East Africa, which has previously been perceived as engaging less in fostering than other African regions (for recent studies highlighting fostering in East Africa, see Cotton and Beguy 2021; Gaydosh 2019, 2015; Hedges et al. 2019; Grant and Yeatman 2014). In particular, we highlight fostering among a potentially highly vulnerable group: the children of single mothers living in informal slum settlements, rarely the focus of studies of fostering. Rates of single motherhood are high in Kenya and in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Clark and Hamplová 2013), where rapid urbanization is leading to more children being exposed to slum conditions (Beguy et al. 2015; UN-Habitat 2014). Sending children to live with kin elsewhere may be an important coping strategy for single mothers, both to reduce the burden of raising children alone and to provide children with an opportunity to grow up outside the slums.

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