

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

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## Abstract

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

## Background

Fostering is common throughout sub-Saharan Africa, where it may be used to cement kinship ties, provide educational opportunities, and shift the financial burden of child-raising from biological parents to others. The role of mother's migration in fostering, however, is relatively unknown.

Few studies on fostering in Kenya: cross-national studies suggest approximately 7% of children (McDaniel & Zulu 1996) throughout Kenya; no research on fostering rates among those living in Nairobi

Both migration and fostering decisions often take place within kinship networks and are strategies that help families survive over time. We know relatively little, however, about how mothers make decisions about fostering in relation to migration.

## Research Questions

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

## Setting

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



Korogocho and Viwandani, like other slums in sub-Saharan Africa, are over-crowded, and residents face a number of problems and risks to health and security. The majority of residents in both communities were born elsewhere and migration rates, especially for women and children, are high (Beguy et al., 2010)

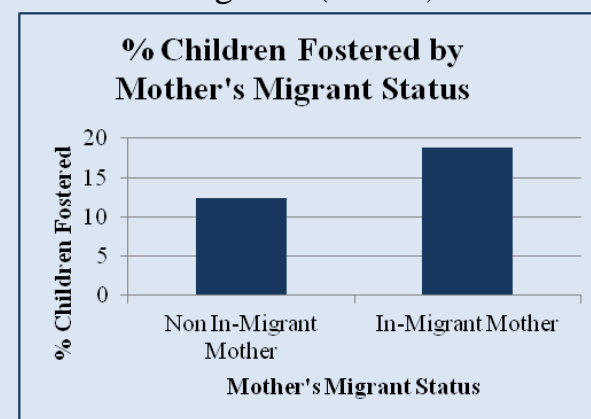
## Data & Methods

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

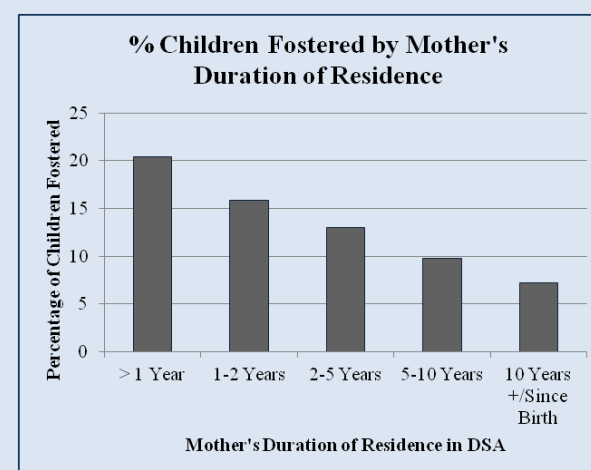
**Qualitative Analysis:** We use results of 65 in-depth interviews conducted in Korogocho and Viwandani in 2011 and 2013. We analyze transcripts thematically based on themes that emerged about migration, childrearing, and reasons behind decisions about child residence.

## How Many Children are Fostered?

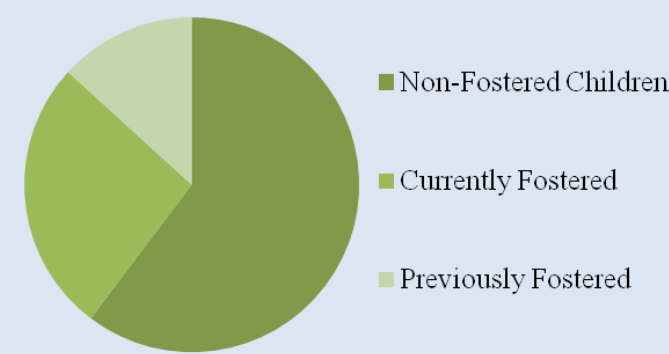
14.5% of all children are fostered. Recent in-migrants report more fostered children (18.9% of their children) compared to non in-migrants (12.4%).



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



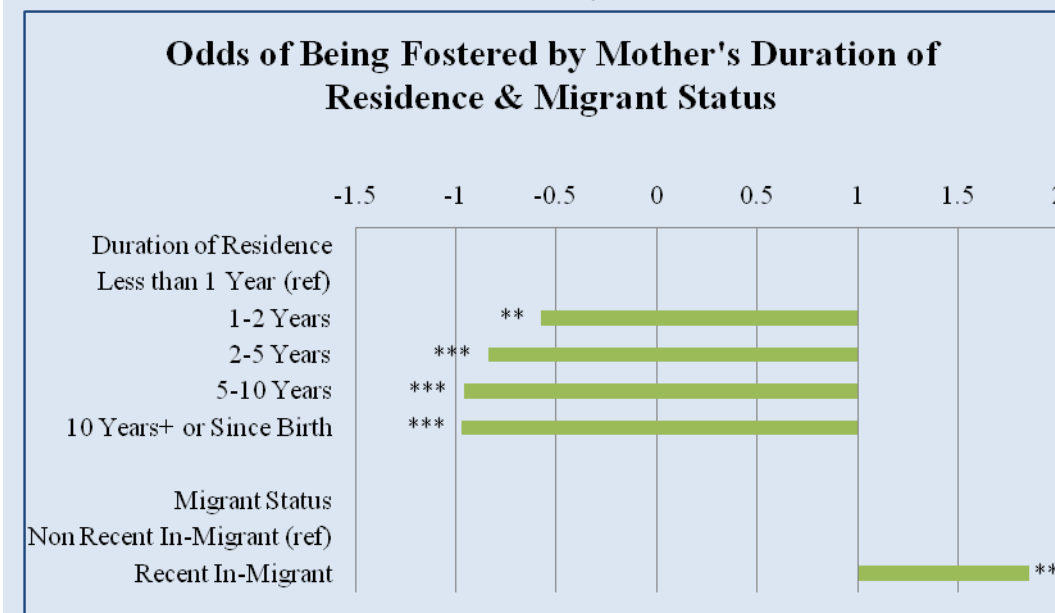
## Qualitative Sample - Fostering



Of 204 children reported by women in our qualitative sample, 54 are currently fostered and 27 were fostered in the past. 42 mothers have experience with child fostering: 24 have currently fostered children, 13 have fostered in the past, and 5 have both currently and previously fostered children.

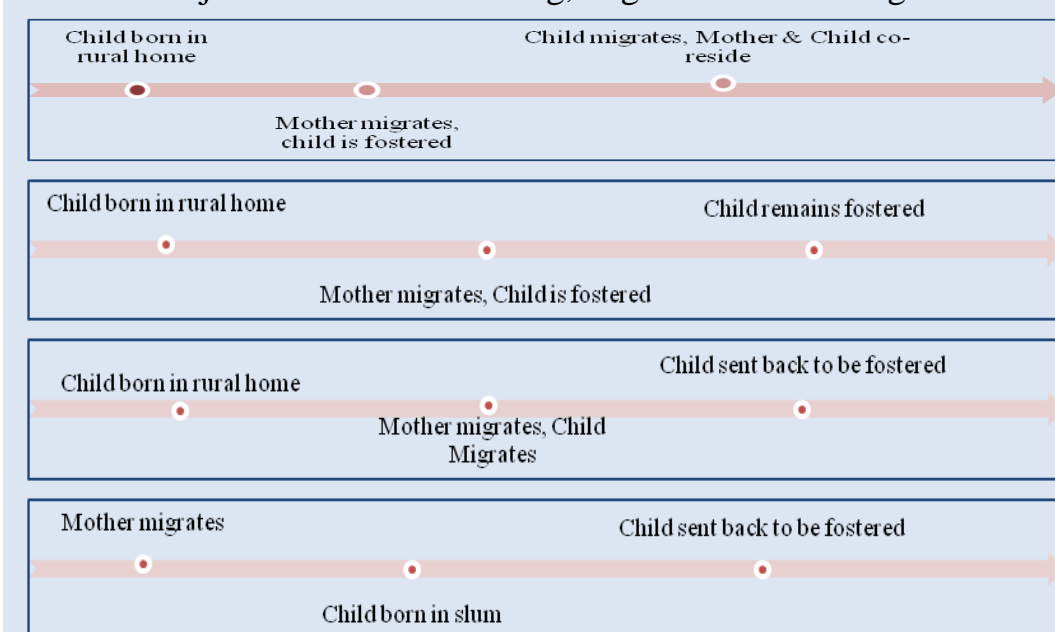
## Migration & Fostering

Odds of being fostered decrease as mothers' duration of residence increases. All children of women residing in the DSA for more than 1 year are significantly less likely to be fostered compared to those living in the DSA for less than 1 year. Children of recent in-migrants are 1.85 times as likely to be fostered than children of non-recent in-migrants.



## When are Children Fostered?

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



## Why are Children Fostered?

### Financial Reasons

"[I came with] my husband and children. But I took some of my kids back home because life was too difficult here." **Patricia, Viwandani, 3 currently fostered**

"Due to financial problems, I couldn't come to stay with her here. How can you even go to wash somebody's clothes while with her? I had to leave her with my brother so that I can be able to work and provide for her needs." **Julia, Viwandani, 1 currently fostered**

### Fears about life in the slums

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

### Preferences of extended kin

"She was staying with her grandmother... My mother was lonely having lost all her children except me... I could have refused anybody else." **Frances, Korogocho, 1 previously fostered**

## Conclusions



While the majority of women living in Korogocho and Viwandani live with their young children, many children are fostered for at least some period of childhood

A greater percentage of children of recent in-migrants are fostered compared to non in-migrants. The odds of being fostered are nearly twice as high for children of recent in-migrants.

A relationship between mother's duration of residence in the slums and child fostering is apparent in both descriptive and multivariate analysis: children of women residing for less than 1 year in the slums are most likely to be fostered, with the odds of being fostered decreasing as mother's duration of residence increases.

For many women, migration decisions and fostering decisions are closely related. Women indicate they migrate after a child is born and foster from the time of migration (a child is 'left behind') or choose to foster after a child has co-resided for some time in the slums (a child is 'sent back'). Children are often shifted from mother's care to kin depending on women's migration and residence in the slums, as many women indicate they prefer rural areas for child safety, health, and education.

Longitudinal data about children living outside the household would be ideal to demonstrate the ways that childbearing, migration, and fostering occur over women's life-course.



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