

FOSTERAGE AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN RURAL DAGBON, NORTHERN REGION OF GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Fosterage is a traditional cultural practice where children are given to relatives and friends to raise up. It was done to ensure that children were raised under strict conditions that will prepare them to face life in adulthood. This kind of strict training could not be offered by biological parents. It was also done to foster family and friendship ties. However, in most cases, fostered children are excessively used for domestic chores at the expense of their education. The paper examines the effects of fostering on children's educational attainment.

Key words: *Fostering, adoption, fostered parent, biological parent, educational inequality*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, Ghana has made tremendous strides towards the achievement of universal basic education. Enrolment at the basic education level has been increased and there is almost gender parity in enrolment. The massive expansion of school infrastructure, the pro-poor policies such as the School Feeding Programme, the Capitation Grants, etc, contributed significantly to the increased in enrolment at the basic level. These are all part of Government efforts to achieving the universal basic education as enshrined in the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All policies.

Despite these impressive and elaborate policies intervention towards the achievement of universal basic education in Ghana, certain socio-cultural practices such as fosterage and adoption still derail government's efforts and contribute to disparities in educational attainment.

This paper seeks to examine the fostering and adoption and how they contribute to inequality in educational attainment in Ghana. Specifically, the paper examines the effects of fosterage on the girls education, the nature and extent of child fosterage, factors that encourage fosterage, reasons for fosterage, fosterage and educational inequality and

the relationship between biological parents and their fostered children.

2.0 METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

The approach was structured in a way that enabled the collection of high quality data from 10 sampled rural communities in the Tamale metropolis, while ensuring timeliness and technical quality. The study combined good community entry strategies and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques. The techniques took into cognizance the wider issues relating to focus or target groups (e.g., teachers, parents, fostered children, foster parents, etc).

Data was collected from both secondary and primary sources. The secondary data was obtained from published sources such as books, journal articles, news papers, magazines, reports, etc. also school attendance registers, terminal reports and class exercises were reviewed.

Snowball approach was also used to identify fostered children and in all the ten communities. For the foster parents, one or two were identified first and interviewed, and thereafter, they led the researchers to more foster parents. At the school level, fostered children were identified in each class and those from

the age of seven years and above were selected and interviewed. In each community, 20 fostered children who were not attending school were also identified and interviewed. However, the number of fostered children in this category could not be predetermined prior to the field work and therefore varied from community to community.

3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE PRACTICE OF FOSTERAGE

Tradition, religion and cultural influences have different impact, on men, women and children. The practice largely undermined the position of women in traditional societies and reinforced discriminatory cultural practices. Kinship and family relationship, among the Dagomba have entrenched fosterage and adoption of children as a traditional means of binding families' together. Traditionally, large families are cherished, valued and people who belong to large families feel proud and deeply satisfied and secure. To this end, maintaining large family tiers is very important.

For those who see fostering as a means of social security, they argue that the extended family system permits frequent exchanges of resources and children across nuclear family units in ways that are intended to reduce socioeconomic inequality. The notion that extended families provide social safety net and buffer socioeconomic inequalities has gained credence in the literature on families and inequality in Africa, in studies focused on class conflict, welfare inequality across households [4; 2], or schooling inequalities among children [12].

For the rural Dagomba, large families are considered as social capital, which are useful during weddings, naming ceremonies, installation of chiefs and funerals. Fosterage is used not only as a means of binding families and relationships together, but also as a means of socialization. According to Firth [8], "fostering and adoption are specific mechanisms which detach the child from its parents and attach it to the members of the wider kinship group". It is not only Dagomba who practice it, but many other ethnic groups in northern Ghana, including the Gonja [9;10].

The Dagomba place high premium on the future of the child and therefore proper socialization of the child is great value. To ensure good socialization of the child, they believe that parents are naturally sympathetic and kind towards their biological

children may not be good socialization agents. "Instead it may be the father's sibling or mother's father or brother or another relative who becomes in a sense the social parent of the child" [13].

To further strengthen the bonds between a woman's natal family and that of her marital family, it is expected that "If a man gives his daughter to another man in marriage the husband may give back a child to his wife's father so that the other children who stay with their father may know their mother's side through their brother who has returned there" [13].

Macro-demographic factors are also sometimes critical as well in influencing fosterage. Large differences in fertility and the incidence of childlessness promote fosterage for both labor and companionship [7]. For those who see fosterage as an economic venture, they argue that, macro-level influences are important issues in fosterage because it is focused on micro-level decision-making, which emphasizes and motivates both sending and receiving households [4]. When fosterage is seen from this perspective, it can be construed as a bargain between sending and receiving households. For many poor families, out-fostering children hold the promise of a better life for their children. Even if these parents must forgo the immediate labor contributions of their children, they expect to benefit in the long run when their children gain a foothold in the urban labor force [7].

These expectations of economic mobility have implication for some urban families in Africa who face constant pressure to take in additional relatives, especially youth seeking education and employment. The motivations of host families can be semi-altruistic, if socialization puts a cultural premium on extended-family assistance [3]. Motivations may also be construed as a pay-back for the selective care received in youth [11; 15], a means to avoid ostracism, validate one's status, or access family labor [4;2].

While some families in Dagbon¹ do send children to live with relatives (particularly in urban towns) for the purposes of better access to formal schooling, the literature does not suggest this to be a dominant reason for fosterage. However, Oppong argues that, fosterage for the purpose of access to schooling was notable in the early years of state education. This was due to the fact that long distances children trekked to

¹ The state of the Dagombas in Northern Ghana

school until relatively recent years, children, most often boys, would often be fostered to relatives living in towns, especially the regional capital Tamale. While living in town, the boys would perform domestic chores in teachers' or clerks' households in return for a place to stay [13].

3.2 The effects of fosterage on education

A study conducted by [5] on fosterage and educational access among the Dagomba in the Savelugu-Nanton district reveals that a fostered child has 19% chance lower than a biological son or daughter in attending school, all things being equal. This effect is approximately twice as large as the effect of a child being male as opposed to female [5].

The study further indicates that although the prevalence of fosterage was higher for girls; the negative effect on attendance at school was higher for boys. On the effects of gender and fosterage, fostered boys and girls have almost equal initial access. The study added that fosterage is almost twice as prevalent (at 18.7% of all children) in the Savelugu-Nanton district compared to the Northern Region generally. It concluded that, the prevalence of fosterage was found to be higher for girls, at 22.6%, compared to 15.7% for boys and that fostered children are typically more over-age for their grade if they are boys, and more likely to drop-out of school if they are girls [5].

[5] indicates that, one of the biggest challenge faced by fostered girls in Dagbon is that girls are typically fostered by women and most often their husbands may not regard these girls as part of their responsibility in respect of meeting schooling costs

An important reason for lower levels of educational access among fostered children in Dagbon, as elsewhere, consists in the differences that may exist between the expectations of fostered and biological children in terms of work. The issue of work is well illustrated in historical context: sometimes parents wish to send their children to school but are prevented from doing so by the 'family head', a child's foster parent or fear of displeasing the chief [14].

4.0 THE STATE OF CHILD FOSTERAGE AND ITS EFFECTS ON GIRLS EDUCATION

4.1 Type of family of household respondents

The study considered the type of family system commonly practised in the study communities. The study found that 66% were polygamous families while 34% were monogamous. The general belief is that, fostered children in polygamous families tend to do a lot of domestic chores and the likelihood of them being not properly cared for is high.

For the fostered children, the study reveals that, 67% of them live in polygamous homes. The rationale was to find out the extent to which fostered children were cater for and the amount of household chores they are engaged in. This is because, most polygamous families tend to be fairly larger than monogamous families. When children are many in a household, the likelihood for them to compete for the limited facilities² is high, i.e. the tendency for there to be pressure on the household resources/facilities is greater if the household is not endowed with resources. In large family houses, girls are likely to be used for domestic chores to supplement household income at the expense of their studies.

4.2 Number of dependents

The number of dependents of the household heads did not significantly vary from community to community. The study indicates that about 87% of the households have 5 or more dependents. Only 13% have between 1 to 5 dependents. Considering the income levels of these respondents, it means that most families were overstretched by the number of their dependents.

With regards to the fostered children, 13% indicated that they live in families of less than five people. Forty-six percent (46%) indicated that they live in families of between 6 and 10 people, while 41% say they live in families of more than 11 people.

4.3 The nature and extent of child fosterage

Child fosterage is deeply entrenched in the Dagomba society, especially in the rural communities. As indicated earlier, 43.2% of Dagomba women above 16 years, and 18% of men were brought up by people either than their biological parents. This finding corroborates that of [1] who states that Dagomba men

² In terms of accommodation, children may be crowded in a room and may not have space to effectively study at home.

preferred marrying fostered girls to those who were raised by their biological parents. This partly explains why the percentage of respondents who had been fostered was high among those of 16 and above years. One of the interesting finding of the study was that, children as young as two and half years were fostered. Such children are usually taken away as soon as their mothers deliver them. The study indicates that about 47% of the fostered children do not know the age at which they were taken away from their parents. The majority of the foster parents indicated that they prefer fostering children at that tender age. They indicated that the best time to adopt a child is to take him/her when he/she is still an infant. They mentioned that such children normally grow up without knowing their biological parents. This makes it easier to control and to raise them. To buttress this point, two of the women during the focus group discussion at Kpene indicated that they did not know their biological parents until they became adults and were about to get married.

Another dimension of fostering in these communities is that the biological mothers of the fostered children may not be allowed to visit their children. The reason given is that women are emotional and when they are allowed to visit children in their foster homes they may influence the child to run away from the foster home, or may quarrel with the foster parent and this may damage the family relation for which purpose the child is fostered. Even if the child is fostered within the same locality, the mother may not visit her/him.

On the other hand, if a fostered child gets to know her/his biological parents, she/he may be prevented from visiting them regularly. Even if she/he visits the parents, the visit is normally short and not regular to avoid being 'negatively influenced'. Some fostered children may not know or be told of their biological parents until they are due for marriage. Some would get to know that they do not stay with their biological parents through other sources such as play mates, or other women in the house.

The study also found that parents may not give food, money, clothing or anything to their children without passing it through their foster parents. The reason is that, the child is fostered to learn lesson³ of life and such lessons can best be taught by the foster parents. They are supposed to stay with their foster parents

³ Hard work, respect for elders, etc. For girls to become good mothers and house wives in future.

“for better for worse” as one of the respondents put it. She went further to add that “even if the foster parents have nothing to feed on and feed on grasses, the child must also eat the grasses”.

4.4 Extent of fosterage in the study communities

Respondents were asked whether or not there were fostered children in their homes and if yes, how many boys and girls. They were further asked whether they were in school or not, and if yes, how many of the boys were in school and how many of the girls were in school.

Kpene has the highest number (about 45%) of houses with 4 to 5 fostered children. The next highest communities are Kpanvo (about 35%) and Sognayili (about 34%). Regarding houses with 1 or 2 fostered children, Bamvim recorded 48%, Nguru 46%, Kalariga about 41% and Johnshegu about 41%. On the other hand, Kasalugu (58%) recorded the highest number of houses without fostered children, followed by Chanshegu (45%) and Johnshegu about 38%.

With regards to the gender of the fostered children in these communities, generally, in all the communities, fostered children were dominated by girls than boys. Girls constituted 63.8% of fostered children in all the communities. However, Kpanvo recorded the highest (75%) number of fostered girls, follow by Banvim, (70%), Kasalgu (68%) and Sognayili (67%). In terms of boys, Chanshegu recorded the highest figure (45%), follow by Kpene (42%) and Nguru (41%). However, Kpanvo recorded the lowest (25%) number of fostered boys.

4.5 Factors that encourage fosterage

One of the critical factors that contribute to the high rate of fosterage is the practice call 'Prinsi' singular is 'pringa'. This is a practice, where a woman's first pregnancy is officially announced to her by her sister-in-law at a family ceremony⁴. When the woman

⁴ Traditionally when a woman is pregnant for the first time, the family head of her husband's family man consults diviners or mallams to choose among the sisters of the man would officially announce to the woman that she is pregnant. When one of the sisters is chosen, a mallam prepares a talisman and write some verses of the Qur'an on a slate and wash it to be given to the pregnant woman. The family of the man fixes a day and the sister comes to announce the pregnancy. She would say to the pregnant woman “you were a child but now you are grown and

delivers, that child is usually given to the aunt who officially “announced” the pregnancy. Every Dagomba know that such children are usually earmarked for their ‘*priba*’ or aunts. Unless the aunt says she is not interested, the parents cannot keep such a child.

The study found out that the *prinsi* is still widely practiced and therefore, re-enforced fosterage. Thirty five percent (35%) of the children, mostly girls are fostered under this circumstance. When respondents were asked whether they will give their daughters to their sisters or sister-in-laws, an overwhelming majority (over 60%) said yes. The explanation respondents frequently gave was that it has been their cultural practice and “we got up to meet it like that” as they put it.

On the other hand the sister of a man can request for her niece to support her in her household work. More often than not, such fostered girls may be about 8 years or more. This is the age at which they can actually assist in the domestic chores of their aunts. Fostered children under this circumstance are usually not in school. In a situation where they are sent to school, they are usually older than their peers in class. Usually women who are traders or have young children or no child request for their brothers or relatives children, preferably, girls.

4.6 Old age

Another factor responsible for fosterage and adoption is old age of a woman’s parents. Normally when a man or a woman grows old, the daughter in consultation with her husband gives their daughter or son to their grandmother or grandfather. It is believed that at that age the person is old and needs support.

The study indicates that, the education of fostered children under the care of grandparents is more precarious than other fostered children. Their attendance at school is more irregular. Perhaps, because of the age of the grandparents, and the fact

that there is a joking⁵ relationship between grandchildren and grandparents, the children might be uncontrolled and thus not properly monitored in their education. It could also be that, as caretakers/supporters of their grandparents they turn to be over engaged in domestic activities at the expense of their study.

4.7 Death and Inheritance

The death of a man or a woman may also result in their children being fostered by relatives. If the children are young, the girls may be given to their aunts, while the boys go to their uncles or grandmothers, grandfathers or other relatives. Usually, a nephew (if the deceased is man) or niece (if is a woman) is appointed by the family members as the “owner of the funeral”. He/she practically or symbolically takes control over the affairs of the funeral till the end. Such a person may take some of the children of the deceased to care of.

4.8 Skills and knowledge acquisition

Some children are adopted or fostered because their parents want them to learn some particular skills or acquire some knowledge to prepare them for life. Some of these skills are traditional professions and include ‘*lunsi*’ or drummers, blacksmiths, weavers, butchers, ‘*wanzam*’ (barbers), fiddlers and learning of the Holy Qur’an. In all these traditional professions, boys are usually preferred.

The study reveals that, all these forms of adoption/fosterage are still going on. However, the number of children involved in these is minimal (only about 3%) were adopted under these circumstances. However, apart from learning of the Qur’an, all the other traditional professions mentioned above are lineage or family professions and the skills are transmitted from one generation to another. Therefore, children fostered under these circumstances usually have a common ancestor with their master or have consanguinital relation with their masters.

The difference between skills or knowledge acquisition fostering and the other forms of fostering is that, children fostered under these circumstances are usually boys. Secondly they are usually related to their master by blood, except in the case of Qur’anic students. Children fostered under these circumstances

matured”. She then put the talisman on the neck of the pregnant woman. The concoction prepared by the mallam is given to her to drink to protect her and the pregnancy. Before this ceremony, one cannot refer to the woman as a pregnant woman. Whoever does that risk being fined at the chief palace.

⁵ Grandchildren normally refer to their grandmothers as their wives. Girls refer to their grandfathers as their husbands while boys call them their friends.

may return home upon completion of their studies. However, in the other forms of adoption/fosterage, girls may stay there until they marry. Boys may also remain permanently settled in their fostered homes.

4.9 Reasons for fosterage

The study reveals that three major reasons account for the practice of fosterage in the study communities. These are (i) maintenance of family ties; (ii) preparation of the child for future and (iii) assistance to their grandparents.

The first and the most important reason for fosterage is to maintenance of family bonds. This accounts for over 60% of the fosterage cases in the study communities. According to the respondents, fosterage is the most effective means of binding families together. They frequently mentioned that, through fosterage, the two families would be obliged to visit each other from time to time. The fostered child would also grow up to treat his/her half brothers and sisters as well as his or her siblings as family members.

The study found that, it does not matter where the relatives stay, parents are ready to send their children to their relatives under all circumstances; whether they live in town or in rural communities; it does not also matter whether they live in the same community or in different community; whether the foster parents are poor or rich. It does not also matter whether the community the child is being sent has school or not, and whether the foster parent would send them to school or not. All these circumstances have negative effects on the education of the fostered child, especially the girl child.

The second reason often advanced for fosterage is to prepare the child for future life. The study revealed that people in these communities sent their children to their relatives because they believed that it is only these people who can teach them the values⁶ of life. The majority of the respondents, especially the elderly, believe that children raised by their biological parents do not respect, are not

⁶ These values include; hard work, respect, judicious use of resources, dutifulness, leadership skills/qualities, the tradition and culture of Dagomba and know the history of their families.

For girls, they learn how to be hardworking and become good housewives; how to better manage their lives and their families, how to properly care for their husbands and their children, etc.

hardworking, are careless, or do not know the traditions. They also claimed that parents normally do not mete out stiff sanctions to their children when they go wrong. They added that they often pamper the children and this, as they put it “spoil them”. They contended that for children to become successful in life, to have respect and sympathy for others, they must be raised by others than their biological parents. One of the elderly men at Sognayili observed:

“When my daughter who is with her aunt visits me, she always kneels down and greets me. She respects and reveres me and her mother more than her brother and sisters staying with me. She works harder and does not complain about flimsy things. There is a vast difference between her and her siblings and half brothers and sisters who are not fostered. I admire her life and believe she can fit in every society. I wish I could send all my children to their aunts”.

Similar views were expressed by foster parents. They felt their fostered children revere them and work harder for them than their own children.

This finding corroborates that of [1] who stated that fostered children tended to develop into better citizens capable of withstanding odds and hardships and worthy of social respect than children raised by their biological parents. According to him, it was not unusual for male suitors decline to marry girls who were brought up by their biological parents. This contributed immensely to the promotion of fosterage in Dagbon [1].

The third justification for fosterage was provision assistance to grandparents. This occurs in a situation where the grandparents have “nobody” to support them. They indicated that, old people need to be assisted at all times. It was found out that, grandmothers, always preferred fostering girls to boys. On the other hand, grandfathers also preferred fostering boys.

4.10 Type of foster parents

The study also examined the categories of people who often fostered children. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1: Types of Foster Parents

Type of foster parents	Freq	%
Uncles	14	7
Aunts	126	63
Grandmothers	45	22.5
Grandfathers	12	6
Others	3	1.5
Totals	200	100

Source: Field survey, 2013.

From Table 1 it is clear that, the majority (63%) of the fostered children are with their aunts. Grandmothers are the second highest (22.5%) category of foster parents. This also buttresses the point that the majority of fostered children are girls.

4.11 Fosterage and educational inequality

The survey indicates that the daily activities of fostered children, especially girls, could be a stumbling block on their education. As stated earlier, one of the reasons for fosterage is to assist in the domestic chores of the foster parent and not to attend school. As a result, fostered children have to discharge their duties before they go to school or after they close from school. In some cases, they have to forfeit attending school to enable them perform their duties at home. Table 2 depicts some of the daily activities of the children.

Table 2: Daily Activities of Fostered Girls

Daily Activities of Fostered Girls	Percentage
Sweeping of compound	100%
Washing dishes	100%
Taking care of children	86%
Cooking	76%
Fetching water	96%
Running errands	100%
Selling provisions	35%

Source: Field survey, 2013.

The extent to which fostered girls are engaged in domestic chores affects their educational advancement. As depicted on Table 2, some of the daily activities of the fostered children contribute to their late attendance at school. Interestingly, the majority of the foster parents do not see anything wrong with that. After all, the main purpose for which they are fostered is partly to support their foster parents in the domestic chores. For the majority of the foster mothers, education of these girls is secondary issue.

4.12 School and learning challenges of fostered children

From Table 3, it is clear that the incidence of fostered children who do not attend school regularly is high among girls (average 26%) than boys (average 16%). For those without proper school uniform, the average percentage for girls is lower (8%) than boys (16%) in all the communities

Table 3: School and Learning Challenges of Fostered Children

Name of Community	% not attending school regularly			% without proper uniform			% without all exercise books and pencils			% who go to school late		
	M	F	Ave	M	F	Ave	M	F	Ave	M	F	Ave
Banvim	17%	23%	20%	20%	3%	12%	23%	36%	30%	10%	31%	21%
Chanshegu	7%	17%	12%	6%	9%	8%	8%	16%	12%	9%	13%	11%
Nyereshee	21%	44%	33%	31%	14%	23%	36%	38%	37%	37%	30%	34%
Kalariga	14%	32%	23%	12%	7%	15%	25%	25%	25%	26%	24%	25%
Kasalugu	16%	39%	28%	23%	11%	17%	37%	22%	30%	23%	11%	17%
Kpanvo	18%	33%	26%	31%	10%	21%	21%	34%	28%	25%	18%	22%
Kpene	15%	15%	15%	5%	9%	7%	15%	17%	16%	16%	7%	12%
Johnshegu	9%	21%	12%	9%	3%	6%	28%	10%	19%	12%	13%	13%
Nguru	19%	15%	17%	14%	9%	11%	19%	17%	18%	17%	10%	14%
Sognayili	19%	21%	20%	13%	8%	11%	23%	17%	21%	20%	14%	17%
Total Ave	16%	26%	20%	16%	8%	13%	24%	23%	20%	20%	17%	19%

Source: Field survey, 2013.

Table 3 presents details of the situation of fostered children in the ten communities who do not attend school regularly, those without proper school uniform, those without the required number of exercise books as well as those who go to school late. For instance, Nyereshee has on the average (33%), the highest percentage of fostered children who do not attend school regularly. With regard to poor school attendance between the male and female fostered children, the later recorded the highest (44%) at Nyereshee. However, Chanshegu and Johnshegu recorded, on the average, the lowest percentage (12% each) of fostered children who do not attend school regularly.

4.13 Home level and learning challenges of fostered children

Certain conditions at home make it difficult for children to study. These conditions are more applicable fostered girls than boys. The survey examined the conditions at home in terms of learning environment, whether or not children have time to do their home work, whether or not they eat before

going to school, and after break whether the children go back to school after break, whether or not they travelled to work on peoples' farms or worked as heard porters to raise money to support their education, etc.

On these variables, the survey reveals that both fostered girls and boys are caught up in these circumstances. On average about 59.5% of the boy do not have conducive atmosphere to learn at home as against 65% in the case of the girls. Some of these conditions include no/poor electricity, overcrowded rooms, no furniture to study, lack of concentration/interruption due to disturbance of siblings, etc.

For those who reported that they do not have time to do their home work or study at home, the survey reveals that on the average, approximately 42.8% are boys while 57.1% are girls. Some of the common reasons raised include, attending Qur'anic classes in the evening, running errands, household chores, selling provisions for their foster parents, etc.

With regard to those who often went to school hungry, boys recorded 18.8% for all communities, while girls are 24.7%. For those who frequently did not return to school after break time, the average score for boys in all communities is 24.6%, while figure for girls is 30.2%. For children who have travelled to work as head porters or work to earn some money to either support their education or their families, the average for boys is 56% while that of

the girls is 48%. Consistently, with the exception of the last variable (i.e. travel to work) where girls were fewer than boys, in all the cases, girls are always more than boys. It therefore implies that fosterage has negative consequences on girls more than boys. In other words, it affects girls' education more than boys under the same conditions.

Table 4: Home Conditions of fostered Boys

Name of Community	% without conducive learning environment at home	% who do not have time to study at home	% who often go to school hungry	% who often do not return to school after break	% ever traveled in search of work
Banvim	57	52	17	19	35
Chanshegu	67	24	18	29	65
Nyereshee	75	69	27	23	71
Kalariga	41	49	17	19	54
Kasalugu	57	54	23	31	64
Kpanvo	51	50	16	20	43
Kpene	52	30	19	23	63
Johnshegu	64	24	17	31	54
Nguru	68	35	15	30	66
Sognayili	63	41	19	21	45
Total average	59.9	42.8	18.8	24.6	56

Source: Field survey, 2013.

The home conditions of most fostered children are hostile for their educational development. The study found out that, on average, 48% of the fostered children indicated they have traveled to work as head porters or traveled to the towns in south to do menial work during holidays.

4.14 School Drop-out

The average drop-out rate for fostered children in the ten communities is averaged at 34.5% (31.9% for boys and 37% for girls). This means that on average, fostered children who had stopped attending school and later on continued stands at 34.5%. However, a figure of 17% was 'not sure' or did not respond to this question. Kalariga had the highest (50%) number of fostered children who had dropped out of school followed by Johnshegu (45%), Kpene and Ngrun (40%). On the other hand, communities which recorded the lowest figures of fostered children who

dropped out of school are Kpanvo (20%) and Banvim (25%).

Generally on average of 24.5% (21.9% boys and 27% girls) of fostered children had dropped out of school. For the girls, Nguru recorded the highest figure (36%).

The findings so far indicate that the causes of school drop-out in the study area are many. However, the major causes were excessive domestic work, poor performance at school, poverty, farming, lack of parental support, neglect; travelling to work as head porters and lack of encouragement were cited as some of the reasons for dropping out of school. Early marriage and teenage pregnancy were also cited as reasons for girls drop-out of school.

Another issue is lack of interest in education by pupils. This leads to truancy on the part of pupils. Apathy on the part of parents further worsens the

situation since parents do not make the effort to find out whether children attend school or not.

Other factors are teenage pregnancy and *kayayo* (head portage) which result from financial constraints. It was revealed that the major occupation is farming (occupational distribution) which is subsistence in nature. Income earned from subsistence farming is meager and cannot support children's education leading to other problems like out-migration, where children migrate to southern Ghana to work, they are unable to acquire the expected income and some do not get back in school upon their return. The inadequacy of the classrooms also discourages both parents and pupils. Both parents and pupils do not take school seriously.

Finally, seasonal shortage of potable water affects pupils' attendance and performance leading to increased drop-out. For communities⁷ close to Tamale town, the study reveals that most of the boys are engaged in apprentice in vulcanizing and auto mechanics. In terms of poor enrolment of fostered children at primary school, the findings indicate that poverty is a key factor. Many parents complained of lack of money to meet the school needs of their children.

4.15 Do biological parents support Fostered children?

The study also set out to determine whether the fostered children receive financial and material support from their parents. With the exception of Kpanvo, Kpene and Johnshegu, where about 22.4%, 22% and 21% respectively indicated they received support from their fathers and mothers, in the rest of the communities, less than 20% of fostered children get support from their parents.

During the focus group discussion at Kpene, one of the women remarked:

“One cannot even buy something for her daughter who is with her aunt or give her money. You can only do these under cover. When you do this, the aunt will interpret it to mean that you consider her to be poor and cannot buy these things for the girls. Some may say you want to influence the girl to run away from her. These can create confusion between you and your husband if not properly managed”.

It was revealed that, the biological parents of the child had no responsibility to the child once he/she is fostered. The child's health, feeding, education, clothing, etc now become the responsibility of the foster parents. In most cases, the parents of the child, especially the mother may not visit the child in her fostered home. This is common among children fostered by their aunts. Under such circumstances, whatever happened to the child is still considered as part of the “training”.

Life Stories

5. CONCLUSIONS

Fostering is deeply entrenched in the culture of the Dagomba who form about 99% of these communities. In many cases the practice of fostering is linked to superstition, witchcraft and need to appease the ancestors. The people believe that, foster parents, especially the aunts have some kind of supernatural powers that can be invoked on any fostered child whose parents want to take her away without their consent. These make it difficult for fostered children to break away from these circumstances, even if they are not properly treated.

The study found that, in some cases, there is an element of force or right to foster the children. Aunts who announce the pregnancy had the ‘right’ to foster the child, even if the economic condition of this woman were poor or precarious. This may put the education of fostered children in danger; especially when the woman was in polygamous marriage and has no strong income generating activity.

Aunts seem to have complete control over their fostered children even more than their own children. They believe that, children belong to the man and therefore, her brothers' children are her ‘real’ children and not her biological children who belong to her husband and his family. Foster mothers believe that, it is their duty to bring up the children in a way that will adequately prepare them for future life. Therefore, fostering is seen as training ground for the children. In view of this, the child should be able to do all kind of work to prepare him/her for adult life. The principal reason for fosterage is to support the foster parents in their domestic, farming and business activities. But fostered children are often overburdened with domestic activities rather than

⁷ Sognayili, Banvim, Kalariga and Kpanvo

academic work. As a result, schooling is considered as a secondary concern.

One factor that contributes to the perpetuation of fosterage is the practice of “*prinsi*” a situation where men use their sisters to announce the first pregnancy of their wives. Children born out of these pregnancies, especially girls are automatically earmarked for fostering by their aunts.

In many instances, foster parents ‘pretend’ that they support the education of the fostered children. However, during the focus group discussions, it was revealed in most cases foster parents do not see the education of their fostered children as their priority.

The study indicates that 56% of fostered children are girls while 44% are boys. This means that girls are preferred to boys in fosterage. Fosterage also affects girls more negatively than boys.

The results of the study indicate that fosterage has outlived its usefulness and must be cribbed or modified to save the future of the fostered child. Apart from being discriminatory, the fostered child is being used at the expense of their education. Lastly, the purpose for which fostering is being perpetrated is defeated if the child is given traditional and cultural training at the expense of his/her education.

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