

Child fostering in Nairobi and Kampala, a reflection of the social evolutions in East Africa

Abstract:

Child fostering -the arrangement where children live with separately from their parents – is a common phenomenon in Sub Saharan Africa. Its presence varies in East Africa, ranging from an average of 16.4% in Kenya to 35.5% in Uganda. Far from being unchanging practices related to an immutable tradition, child fostering interacts with the economic, social and political contexts of the societies they are implemented in. These arrangements are indeed fulfilling the agenda, means and needs of the parents, free to choose from a wide array of characteristics. Child fostering is therefore evolving, as the evolutions of society changes the contexts and the normative frame of the practices. Studying the evolutions of child fostering practices therefore allows to trace social evolutions.

This communication aims at comparing the characteristics of child fostering and their evolution in the metropolises of Nairobi and Kampala. We will mobilise the FAMILIA datasets -two representative datasets collected in July and August 2024- in order to understand the previous and current practices of child fostering. These dataset are stratified by age and sex, with three equal sets of respondents aged between 18 to 34, 35 to 49 and 50 to 64 years old. The distribution of this data offers the opportunity for a generational analysis of the fostering experiences of the respondents. Our comparison between the two cities will also focus on respondents currently fostering away or hosting children. Pointing out the similarities and divergences between those two capitals will provide a better understanding of these practices, and how those evolutions interact with the social changes in these two countries.

Extended Abstract:

Child fostering remains a major social phenomenon across Sub-Saharan Africa, involving significant proportions of families who continually reinvent and adapt the goals, characteristics, and forms of these practices. Child fostering refers to the social practice in which the care of a minor, along with part of the associated parental responsibilities, is transferred to someone who is not the child's biological parent. This person may be a relative of the child, such as a grandparent or an aunt; these arrangements are referred to as kinship care. The foster parent may also be someone outside the family, such as a neighbour or a friend of the parents; this form is known as external family care.

Beyond the categories of caregivers involved, child fostering is characterised by great diversity, which allows its wide adoption and continual adaptation. Families can adjust various aspects of the practice, such as the timing of fostering (the child's age at the start, the duration, and the frequency of fostering experiences), the extent of parental responsibilities transferred (in decisions about education, access to services, or recognition of family ties), and the nature of the relationship between the child and the fostering family (including distance between households, frequency of contact, and economic exchanges) (Tanguy-Domingos, 2021). In East Africa, the proportion of people involved in child fostering varies by country but remains significant: in 2016, 16.4% of Kenyan women reported having fostered a child away, compared to 35.5% of Ugandan women (Cotton, 2021).

Child fostering is therefore characterised by great diversity, which makes the development of a typology particularly challenging. Several authors have, for instance, identified up to twelve types of child fostering, ranging from forms close to full parental care to those centred on education or apprenticeship fostering (Goody, 1983). Other scholars, focusing on the potential vulnerabilities of child fostering, have distinguished between planned child fostering—which occurs either to give the child access to services or to benefit the parents or foster caregivers—and emergency fostering, a coping strategy arising from crisis situations and thus involving limited planning capacity, for example in cases of child abandonment or parental death (Golaz, 2015).

Far from being static practices rooted in immutable traditions, child fostering interacts with the economic, social, and political contexts in which it is implemented. Owing to the remarkable diversity of its forms and functions, parents are able to modify and adapt these practices to their specific needs and goals. They can therefore adjust child fostering to evolving social, economic, and political contexts (Alber, 2019).

In Kenya and Uganda, families have mobilised child fostering as a coping strategy to confront the HIV crisis during the 1990s and 2000s (Kasedde et al., 2014), as well as during periods of civil war and internal conflict (Twikirize and Spitzer, 2019). Child fostering also facilitates the ongoing urbanisation process—an exponential phenomenon in Kenya and Uganda—by enabling parents to move to cities while leaving their children with relatives in rural areas, thereby easing their settlement in urban environments (Cotton and Oduor, 2025). Child fostering is therefore particularly important for single mothers, granting them access to new opportunities (Cotton and Beguy, 2021). Other scholars note that children may also be sent to

cities to gain better access to education, healthcare, and other services, as well as broader life opportunities (Deleigne and Pilon, 2011).

The transformations and adaptations of child fostering therefore reflect broader social changes on the one hand, and redefinitions of family ties and structures on the other. Several authors have emphasized that urban contexts—combined with growing migration flows and increased exposure to alternative family models—have strengthened the rise of the nuclear family, which now increasingly competes with extended family models (Ikamari and Agwanda, 2020). In East Africa, this transformation is visible in shrinking household sizes and declining fertility rates (Rossier *et al.*, 2023). This social change interacts with child fostering: not only does child fostering contribute to facilitating rural–urban migration, but changes in family relationships also alter and reshape fostering practices.

This communication seeks to explore the transformations of child fostering in Nairobi and Kampala, in order to identify potential convergences, nuances, and differences between the two capitals. It draws on the FAMILIA datasets—two surveys conducted in June, July, and August 2024—representative of the Kampala metropolitan area and the Nairobi municipal area. These datasets, collected using the same questionnaire design, allow for a robust comparative approach. A stratified sampling strategy was implemented during data collection, creating three equal subgroups of respondents aged 18–34, 35–49, and 50–64 years.

These datasets are particularly relevant for exploring respondents’ personal experiences, allowing for a generational analysis. They include detailed information on the temporal and geographic characteristics of respondents’ fostering experiences. Moreover, they provide data on the profiles of the guardians involved, the initial reasons for living with those individuals, and the current nature of these relationships. This generational analysis, covering respondents born between 1960 and 2006, will allow us to assess the diversity of practices and to identify long-term trends in child fostering.

This generational analysis will be complemented with an examination of respondents’ current child fostering practices, both as biological parents and as foster caregivers. The section of the survey concerning respondents’ children makes it possible to identify their biological children who do not live with them, as well as non-biological children living in their households, thus providing an accurate depiction of current fostering practices. More specifically, we have access to information on the timing and duration of fostering arrangements, the relationships between the child’s biological parents and the respondent, and the main motivations for the respondent to host a child. We will also draw on other demographic modules of the dataset to establish the profiles of individuals and households that either host children or foster them away.

Throughout these two sections, we will introduce and discuss the strengths and limitations of an attempt to establish a typology based on the primary motivations for fostering. We distinguish three main types of child fostering: fostering carried out in the best interest of the child (to improve access to services, education, healthcare, and other opportunities); fostering undertaken in the interest of the parents or guardians (for example, to facilitate migration to the city or to support an elderly parent); and fostering that occurs in the context of crisis

situations (such as child abandonment, parental death, separation, or household dissolution). While this typology has its own limitations, it and the associated profiles may provide valuable insights into the potential vulnerabilities linked to child fostering.

The first results of our analyses tend to confirm national estimates regarding the prevalence of child fostering in Kampala and Nairobi, while adding nuance to its generational distribution. Focusing on respondents' personal experiences, around 15% of respondents in Nairobi and 35.3% in Kampala report having lived with a guardian—figures that are consistent with the estimates provided by the Demographic and Health Surveys. It is nonetheless noteworthy that the proportion of respondents reporting a guardian declines among older generations in both cities. While memory bias cannot be excluded, this result does not suggest a decrease in the prevalence of child fostering practices.

The analysis of current child fostering practices also yields insightful findings. Consistent with previous publications, households hosting children are on average wealthier, while respondents fostering children away tend to live in poorer households. Moreover, significant differences emerge between Nairobi and Kampala. In line with previous studies, in Nairobi the profiles of respondents fostering children away suggest a stronger reliance on matrilineal networks—mostly maternal grandparents and aunts—to meet specific needs. This pattern is reflected in the relatively high proportion of single mothers among parents who foster their children away. In Kampala, the situations and profiles related to child fostering are more diverse, suggesting that fostering there fulfills a wider range of purposes.

Eventually, the typology opens new opportunities for analysis. Temporal analyses of respondents' fostering experiences suggest that, in both Nairobi and Kampala, emergency fostering starts earlier, lasts on average longer, and has longer-lasting effects than other types of child fostering. Emergency fostering is also associated with lower geographic mobility, consistent with the idea of an unplanned coping strategy in response to a shock. This typology can also be applied to current practices, focusing on non-biological children in co-residence with respondents. The results indicate a strong pattern according to the gender of the hosting parent: in both Nairobi and Kampala, emergency fostering is overrepresented when the hosting parent is male, whereas the distribution is more diverse for female hosting parents. These findings suggest that male guardians are more often involved in exceptional situations, while women are considered the preferred option, reinforcing the overrepresentation of female hosting parents.

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