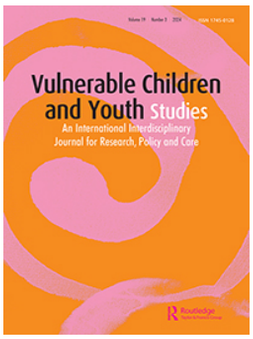

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Child fostering and school attendance in West Africa over time

Pearl S. Kyei

Regional Institute for Population Studies, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana

ABSTRACT

Informal fostering arrangements can relieve pressure on parents and promote social mobility for children from poor households in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the motivation of host households to invest in fostered children would determine the extent of the benefits. This study uses Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data on children 6–12 years with both parents alive in five West African countries (Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Togo) to assess the relationship between foster status and school attendance in two time periods: 2005–2006 and 2017–2018. Multilevel logit regressions are used to estimate the likelihood of ever attending school. The results indicate that the likelihood of attending school for fostered children relative to non-fostered children was negative and statistically significant in 2017–2018 but was not different in 2005–2006. Further, the negative association between foster status and school attendance was larger for children in richer households in both time periods. These findings highlight the need for further research to provide insight into the dynamics of fostering children to higher socioeconomic status households.

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Child fostering; informal foster care; kinship care; school attendance; educational inequality

Background

Social parenting, particularly kinship care, represents an integral part of the lives of many children in sub-Saharan Africa (Ariyo et al., 2019; Castle, 1995; Cotton, 2021; Lachaud et al., 2016; Zimmerman, 2003). Cotton (2021) estimated that between 20% and 40% of the mothers in West African countries had fostered out at least one child between 1986 and 2019. Child fostering, the practice of residing without biological parents, can allow children, through extended social networks, to access greater resources than nuclear families alone can provide Akresh (2004); Eloundou-Enyegue and Stokes (2002); Goody (1982). When parents can send their children to live with other households for extended periods, it is one of the ways that families utilize external support to raise children. Families, typically those from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, can make extensive use of fostering to give their children access to more opportunities than they would have if they stayed with their parents. Thus, informal child fostering arrangements can act as a social mobility mechanism for children with lower SES (Ainsworth, 1996; Akresh, 2004; Castle, 1995; Eloundou-Enyegue & Stokes, 2002). Cotton's (2021) study of

CONTACT Pearl S. Kyei PKyei@ug.edu.gh Regional Institute for Population Studies, University of Ghana, P.O. Box LG 96 Legon, Accra, Ghana

children with living mothers found that an important correlate of fostering out children that is consistent over time and across countries is the proportion of mothers who are never married and the mean number of children ever born, which is indicative of the importance of fostering as a support mechanism.

The literature has shown that the reasons for fostering are primarily economic (Ainsworth, 1996; Ardayfio-Schandorf & Amissah, 1996) and identifies two main types of fostering. The first is crisis fostering (Goody, 1982; Isuigo-Abanihe, 1985), which is a response to unexpected health or economic shocks to households such as the loss of a breadwinner or caregiver. The other is purposive fostering (Goody, 1982; Serra, 2009), defined as a voluntary decision by parents to foster out their children. Various factors motivate households to purposively foster out or receive a child. Alliance fostering is supposed to promote social mobility and improve the socioeconomic status and educational welfare of fostered children and their families (Ainsworth, 1996), kinship fostering (Castle, 1995) which aims primarily to strengthen kinship ties between families, fostering that facilitates the migration of mothers for economic opportunities (Ainsworth, 1996), and educational and apprenticeship fostering (Castle, 1995) which facilitates the migration of children for their own educational or economic opportunities.

Education is one of the leading reasons for fostering out children (Akresh, 2004; Eloundou-Enyegue & Stokes, 2002; Goody, 1982). Barriers to education in developing countries include low socioeconomic status (Delprato & Sabates, 2015; Kuno et al., 2021; Seshie-Nasser & Oduro, 2016) and lack of geographic access to schools (Huisman & Smits, 2009; Idei et al., 2020), both challenges that child fostering can help alleviate. Poorer parents can foster children out to households that have greater socioeconomic resources to invest in education. Households in communities with limited schooling access can also send their children to households living in areas with greater access.

Child fostering should be beneficial for children's education when it moves them into higher SES households and theoretically should lead to a decline in inequality and reduce intergenerational transfers of poverty. In practice, however, it may be detrimental in the long run and maintain or even exacerbate the differences between fostered and non-fostered children if host households do not invest in providing fostered children with the needed resources, to improve their welfare. Fostering arrangements in sub-Saharan Africa are typically informal (Abdullah et al., 2021; Ariyo et al., 2019; Cotton, 2021; Roby, 2011) and unregulated leading to the risk of fostering being detrimental to children. The absence of a parent or more importantly a parent with decision-making power in the household's expenditure and consequently education investments drives the association between child fostering and educational participation. Where the welfare of fostered children may not be as important to the household head as that of biological children or original members of the household, children would face discrimination during resource allocation (Becker, 1993; Becker & Tomes, 1986). This is particularly of concern where there are additional domestic labour incentives for fostering in children (Zimmerman, 2003) that would hinder the educational participation of fostered children if they are kept out of school to perform domestic chores.

The 'Cinderella effect' was originally used to explain the finding that children are significantly more likely to be maltreated by their stepparents than by their biological parents (Case et al., 1999; Daly & Wilson, 2001) and can be adapted for the study of fostered children. This Cinderella effect predicts that children not living with their

biological parents would have fewer resources allocated to them because adult decision-makers would not have as much incentive to invest in children who are not permanent members of their households and for whom the returns to these investments may benefit other households. The Cinderella effect would be expected to be especially severe for fostered children. This is because original research in developing countries focused on children living with stepparents, suggesting that a natural parent was present in the household with the child. However, fostered children do not have a parent living with them to protect their educational interests.

Where fostering is primarily driven by economic reasons, then the parents of fostered children would be from a lower socioeconomic background than the foster households and may not have enough power to ensure their children receive the expected educational benefits. They may also not be living close enough to host households to monitor their children's well-being. Because fostering arrangements are usually voluntary decisions made by parents, and no designated institutions regulate the care of fostered children, this would imply that host households would have no legal or economic motivation to invest in fostered children's education. Of course, this may not be true of fostering by relatives where kinship alone could provide enough incentives for host households.

Studies have shown that fostering has a positive correlation with schooling outcomes in some cases (Akresh, 2004; Ariyo et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2003) and is associated with negative outcomes in others (Ainsworth, 1996; Ariyo et al., 2019; Cichello, 2003; Gage, 2005, Hampshire et al., 2015; Lachaud et al., 2016). In some cases, there are no significant differences by foster status (Beck et al., 2015; Darko & Carmichael, 2020; Hedges et al., 2019). Factors such as the closeness of the relationship to the household members in the foster child's new home (Darko & Carmichael, 2020; Hedges et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2003) and the socioeconomic status of the foster caregivers (Ariyo et al., 2019; Beck et al., 2015; Cichello, 2003; Hedges et al., 2019) have been identified as factors that are likely to engender positive outcomes for fostered children.

The literature examining the schooling outcomes of fostered children has largely focussed on fostered children as a homogenous group without distinguishing between orphaned and non-orphaned children (Cotton, 2021; Hampshire et al. 2015), who may have varying degrees of vulnerability. Given the well-documented negative influence that orphanhood independently exerts on educational outcomes (Bicego et al., 2003; Blevins & Kawata, 2021; Hampshire et al., 2015), it is necessary to establish a similar level of understanding of how fostering influences the schooling of children who are not orphaned.

This study examines the correlation between foster status and school attendance for children with both parents alive in five West African countries that had data spanning at least a decade to determine whether there had been changes over time in the relationship. The analysis further assesses whether the household wealth quintile of residence influences the relationship between foster status and school enrolment. The first hypothesis is that fostered children are less likely to attend school than children who are not fostered but the disadvantage would be expected to decline over time as free primary education policies in the sub-region work to reduce barriers to education. The second hypothesis is that the gap between fostered and non-fostered children will be smaller for wealthier households as they would have more resources to invest in both fostered and non-

fostered children in their care, while poorer households would experience greater competition for the resources to be allocated to education.

Materials and methods

This study uses data from five West African countries that conducted surveys in both the third and sixth rounds of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) which were conducted approximately a decade apart: Gambia (2005, 2018), Ghana (2006, 2017), Guinea-Bissau (2006, 2018), Sierra Leone (2005, 2017) and Togo (2006, 2017). Therefore, the analysis is run for pooled samples for the two rounds, i.e. MICS 3 (2005–2006) and MICS 6 (2017–2018). MICS is a global program that collects nationally representative data on maternal and child health (see Khan & Hancioglu, 2019 for additional information on the MICS survey methods and measures).

The sample comprised children 6–12 years, the equivalent of primary school age. The analysis was restricted to children who had both parents alive, were unmarried and were not identified as live-in servants in the data.

In this study, a fostered child is defined as one who is not orphaned but does not reside with a biological parent. The sample composition for this study that differs from others is that both parents of children must be alive. The additional criterion for having both parents alive is introduced because the reasons for fostering were not available in the data. This restriction aims to exclude children who are fostered for crisis reasons and focus on purposive fostering where parents make a voluntary decision to foster out children presumably for the benefit of the child. Furthermore, because events that can trigger crisis fostering such as the loss of a parent, can also be disruptive to schooling, the decision is made to focus on children who are not orphaned.

For the analyses, multilevel regressions (individual and country levels) were used to model the relationship between foster status and school attendance. School attendance refers to whether a child has ever attended school. The covariates are the age and sex of the child, type of place of residence (urban or rural) and household wealth quintile. Household wealth quintile is a measure of socioeconomic status provided by the MICS and is based on household asset ownership and housing characteristics.

Two models each were run for the two survey rounds (MICS 3 and MICS 6). The first model predicts the likelihood of ever attending school using foster status and the covariates listed above. The second model introduces an interaction term for foster status and household wealth quintile to determine whether differences by foster status decrease as household wealth increases.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the sample. The percentage of children with both parents alive that were fostered slightly increased from 16.7% to 19.4% between MICS 3 (2005–2006) and MICS 6 (2017–2018) for the countries in the sample suggesting that purposive child fostering could be on the rise.

Comparing fostered children in the pooled sample to those who are not fostered, reveals that there is no difference in the percentage of children who have ever attended school: 80.7% of the fostered children and 80.8% of the non-fostered had ever attended school. In

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of sample

		Survey round		Foster status	
Variable	Total	MICS 3	MICS 6	Foster	Not fostered
Percentages					
Foster status					
Fostered	18.35	16.72	19.42	–	–
Not fostered	81.65	83.28	80.58		
School attendance					
Ever attended school	80.77	73.44	85.60	80.65	80.80
Never attended school	19.23	26.56	14.40	19.35	19.20
Sex					
Female	49.46	48.69	49.98	48.00	56.00
Male	50.54	51.31	50.02	52.00	44.00
Type of place of residence					
Rural	60.92	68.57	55.87	61.99	56.15
Urban	39.08	31.43	44.13	38.01	43.85
Wealth quintile					
Poorest	21.85	21.82	21.86	22.52	18.86
Second	21.89	21.54	22.13	22.21	20.49
Middle	20.60	20.62	20.58	20.38	21.58
Fourth	18.66	19.06	18.40	18.77	18.18
Richest	17.00	16.96	17.02	16.12	20.89
Means					
Age (years)	8.79	8.80	8.79	8.76	8.95
Total	86,803	34,767	52,036	15,935	70,868

terms of other characteristics, a lower proportion of children that are fostered are females compared to non-fostered children. A higher proportion of fostered children are from rural areas and live in households in the poorest wealth quintile.

Table 2 displays the multilevel logit regression results for the first model predicting the likelihood of ever attending school. Fostered children in the MICS 3 sample have the same likelihood of ever attending school as children who are not fostered. For MICS 6, the pattern differs with fostered children having statistically significantly lower odds of ever attending school. These results imply that the practice of child fostering has become detrimental for children in the decade between the surveys.

Notably, there is also a reversal in the sign of the female coefficient between the two time periods which is indicative of progress being made towards gender parity in primary education in the sub-region. The size of the coefficient for rural residence also declined during this period which could be representative of more equitable access to schooling.

Table 3 presents the results of the second model which introduces an interaction term for foster status and household wealth quintile to determine whether the likelihood of attending school for fostered children increases with the wealth quintile. In this model, again there are some differences between the two time periods. The likelihood of ever attending school for fostered children is positive and statistically significant in MICS 3 but not statistically significant nor negative in MICS 6. The results on the interaction terms confirm that the likelihood of attending school for fostered children relative to non-fostered children varies by household wealth quintile. The difference in the likelihood of attending school by foster status widens for each successive wealth quintile, contrary to the hypothesized relationship.

Figures 1 – 4 present the predicted probability of ever attending school by foster status and household wealth quintile. As expected, the predicted probability of attending school increases for each successive wealth quintile for both fostered and non-fostered children.

Table 2. Results of multilevel logit regression predicting the likelihood of ever attending school(model 1).

	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Round 3					Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Round 6				
Variable	Coefficient	z	P>z	95% confidence interval		Coefficient	z	P>z	95% confidence interval	
Fostered child	−0.04	−1.00		−0.11	0.03	−0.13	−4.18	**	−0.19	−0.07
Rural residence	−0.53	−13.21	**	−0.61	−0.46	−0.45	−10.82	**	−0.53	−0.37
Age of child	0.25	36.36	**	0.23	0.26	0.21	31.30	**	0.20	0.22
Female	−0.13	−4.87	**	−0.18	−0.08	0.17	6.51	**	0.12	0.22
Wealth quintile (reference: poorest)										
Second	0.48	14.07	**	0.41	0.55	0.38	12.35	**	0.32	0.44
Middle	0.75	20.17	**	0.68	0.83	0.80	21.18	**	0.73	0.87
Fourth	1.16	25.83	**	1.08	1.25	1.16	20.85	**	1.05	1.26
Richest	1.92	29.41	**	1.79	2.05	2.06	24.47	**	1.89	2.22
Constant	−1.26	−6.00	**	−1.68	−0.85	−0.17	−0.59		−0.75	0.40
Country										
	Coefficient	Std. error		95% confidence interval		Coefficient	Std. error		95% confidence interval	
Constant	0.19	0.12		0.06	0.68	0.41	0.26		0.12	1.42
	LR test vs. logistic model: chibar2(01) = 916.41 Prob ≥ chibar2 = 0.0000					LR test vs. logistic model: chibar2(01) = 1919.93 Prob ≥ chibar2 = 0.0000				
Number of observations	34,767					52,036				
Number of groups	5					5				
Wald chi2(8)	35,82.85					3,082.79				
Log likelihood	−17,928.77					−19,928.59				
Prob > chi2	0.00					0.00				

Table 3. Results of multilevel logit regression predicting the likelihood of ever attending school (model 2)

	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Round 3					Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Round 6				
Variable	Coefficient	z	P>z	95% confidence interval		Coefficient	z	P>z	95% confidence interval	
Fostered child	0.18	2.57	**	0.04	0.31	0.10	2.00		0.00	0.20
Rural residence	−0.54	−13.23	**	−0.62	−0.46	−0.45	−10.83	**	−0.54	−0.37
Age of child	0.25	36.47	**	0.23	0.26	0.21	31.47	**	0.20	0.22
Female	−0.13	−4.83	**	−0.18	−0.07	0.17	6.56	**	0.12	0.22
Wealth quintile (reference: poorest)										
Second	0.49	13.27	**	0.42	0.56	0.42	12.30	**	0.36	0.49
Middle	0.78	19.33	**	0.70	0.86	0.86	20.34	**	0.78	0.95
Fourth	1.23	25.28	**	1.14	1.33	1.34	21.35	**	1.22	1.47
Richest	2.12	28.20	**	1.97	2.26	2.24	22.60	**	2.04	2.43
Interaction										
Fostered x Second	−0.07	−0.71		−0.26	0.12	−0.23	−2.98	**	−0.38	−0.08
Fostered x Middle	−0.21	−2.07	*	−0.42	−0.01	−0.33	−3.75	**	−0.50	−0.16
Fostered x Fourth	−0.43	−3.85	**	−0.65	−0.21	−0.81	−7.45	**	−1.02	−0.59
Fostered x Richest	−0.82	−6.36	**	−1.07	−0.57	−0.73	−4.40	**	−1.05	−0.40
Constant	−1.30	−6.11	**	−1.72	−0.88	−0.23	−0.77		−0.81	0.35
Country										
	Coefficient	*Std. error*		*95% confidence interval*		*Coefficient*	*Std. error*		*95% confidence interval*	
Constant	0.20	0.13		0.06	0.69	0.41	0.26		0.12	1.43
	LR test vs. logistic model: chibar2(01) = 927.65 Prob ≥ chibar2 = 0.0000					LR test vs. logistic model: chibar2(01) = 1925.41 Prob ≥ chibar2 = 0.0000				
Number of observations	34,767					52,036				
Number of groups	5					5				
Wald chi2 (12)	3,590.35					3,096.15				
Log likelihood	−17904.26					−19895.41				

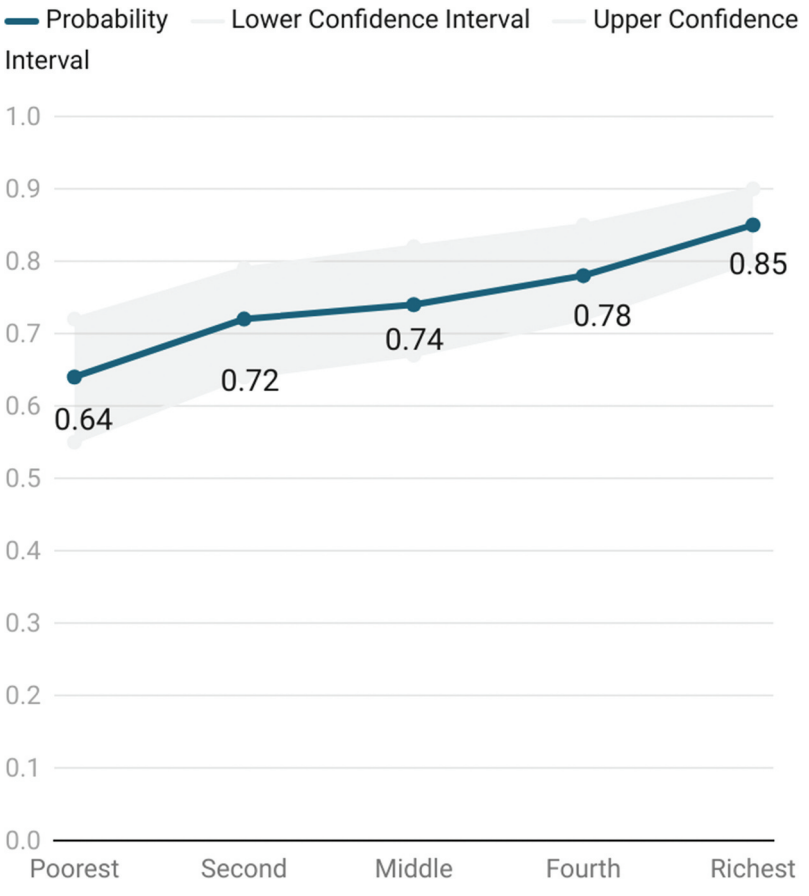

Figure 1. Predicted probability of ever attending school for fostered children, MICS 3 (2005–2006).

In MICS 3, fostered children have a higher probability of ever attending school compared to non-fostered children in the poorest and second wealth quintiles. For the other wealth quintiles, non-fostered children have a higher probability of attending school with the difference between fostered and non-fostered children widening for each quintile. For MICS 6, the wealth gradient in school attendance has become less steep for both fostered and non-fostered children compared with MICS 3. In MICS 6, the predicted probability of school attendance was lower for fostered children in all wealth quintiles except the poorest.

Discussion

This study compares school enrolment of fostered children to that of children who are not fostered over two time periods (2005–2006 and 2017–2018) in five West African countries. The analysis is restricted to children with both parents alive to focus on those who are purposively fostered and exclude orphaned children who would be fostered for crisis reasons and who are additionally vulnerable due to the loss of a parent.

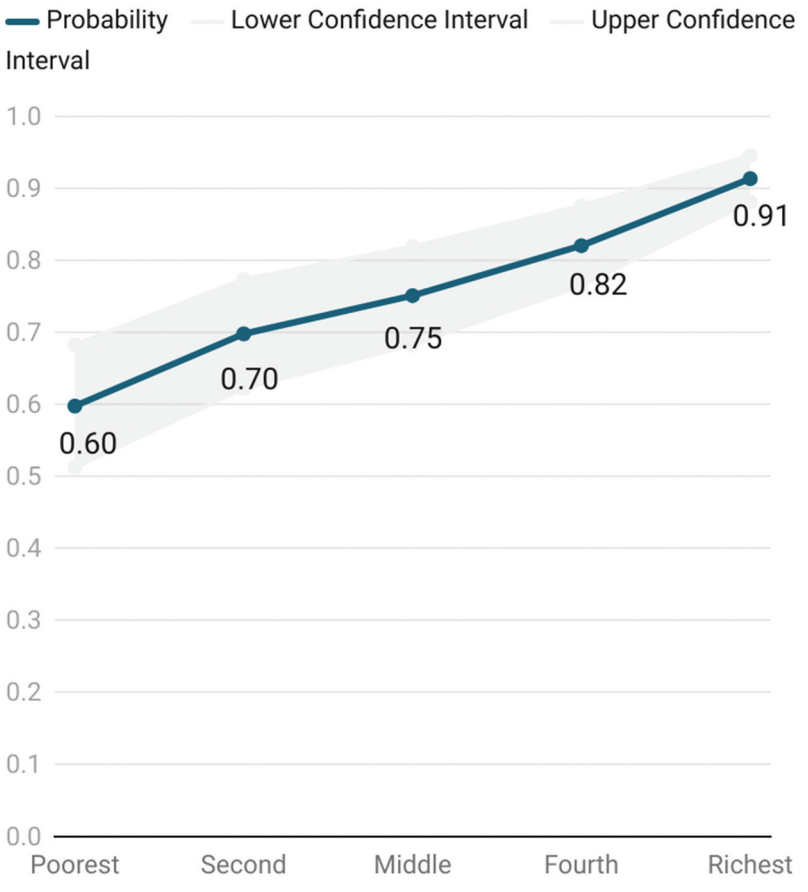

Figure 2. Predicted probability of ever attending school for non-fostered children, MICS 3 (2005–2006).

The findings indicate that being fostered significantly reduces the odds of attending school in the most recent period, in contrast to the earlier period when there was no relationship. The latter finding is in line with Hampshire et al. (2015) who found that purposively fostered children in Ghana who were not orphaned were less likely to be enrolled in school. The negative association observed in the most recent period is notable as less than 1% of the fostered children in the sample were living with non-relatives. Fostering in this study is predominantly kinship care, which the evidence suggests is beneficial for children's schooling (Ariyo et al., 2019; Hedges et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2003) compared with fostering out to non-relatives.

The findings further indicate that the difference in the likelihood of attending school by foster status widens as the household wealth quintile increases, a pattern observed in both periods. The household wealth gradient in school attendance has become less steep over time for both fostered and non-fostered children, which likely reflects global efforts to increase equitable access to schooling. The finding that the gap between fostered and non-fostered children is higher in the richer household wealth quintile is contrary to what would be expected based on the rationale for purposive fostering (Ainsworth, 1996; Akresh, 2004;

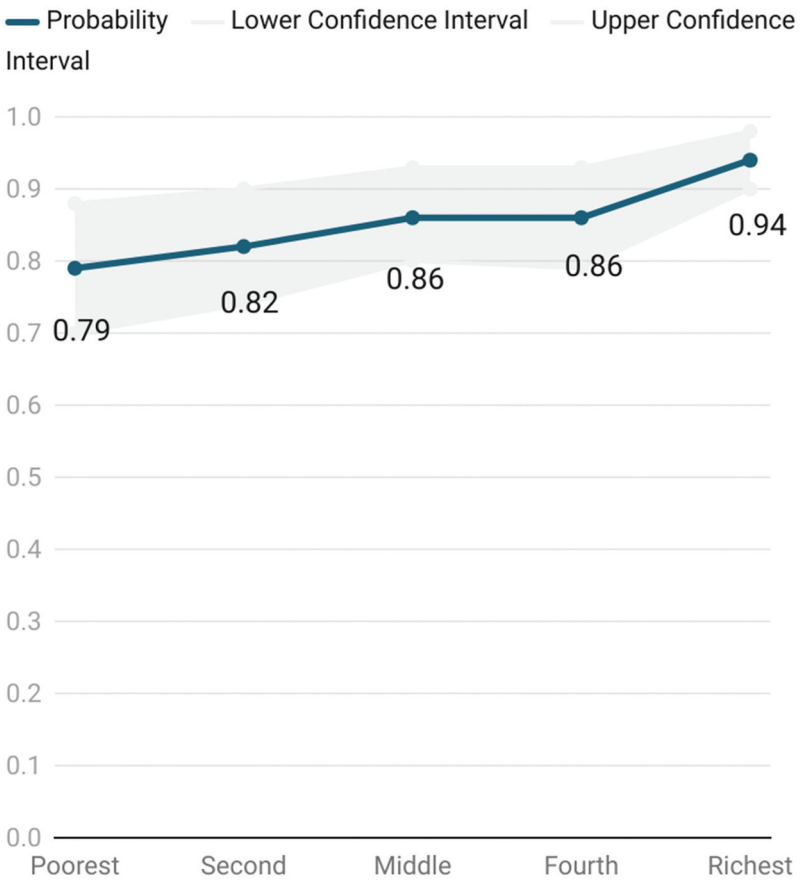

Figure 3. Predicted probability of ever attending school for fostered children, MICS 6 (2017–2018).

Castle, 1995) and also the conclusions from Ariyo et al. (2019) that the socioeconomic status of kinship carers is correlated with better well-being for fostered children. A plausible explanation for the widening gap by household wealth would be the power dynamics at play where poor parents may not be able to intervene if host households interfere with their children's educational participation and general well-being. It is also possible that purposive fostering to wealthier households is primarily for labour from the perspective of the receiving household and schooling is not necessarily an expectation. Wealthier households may be more likely to have a higher demand for domestic labour due to the adults working in the formal sector. This highlights the need for further research to provide insight into the dynamics of fostering children to higher socioeconomic status households.

The prevalence of fostering, indeed the slight increment between the two time periods, suggests that parents continue to perceive the benefits of fostering out their children, which may not be necessarily restricted to only educational outcomes. Alternatively, parents may not realize that they may be sacrificing long-run educational outcomes for a short-term improvement in children's living standards. Perhaps, parents are more concerned with diffusing pressure on familial resources instead of educational outcomes when making fostering decisions. The detrimental effects of child fostering on schooling may not yet be apparent

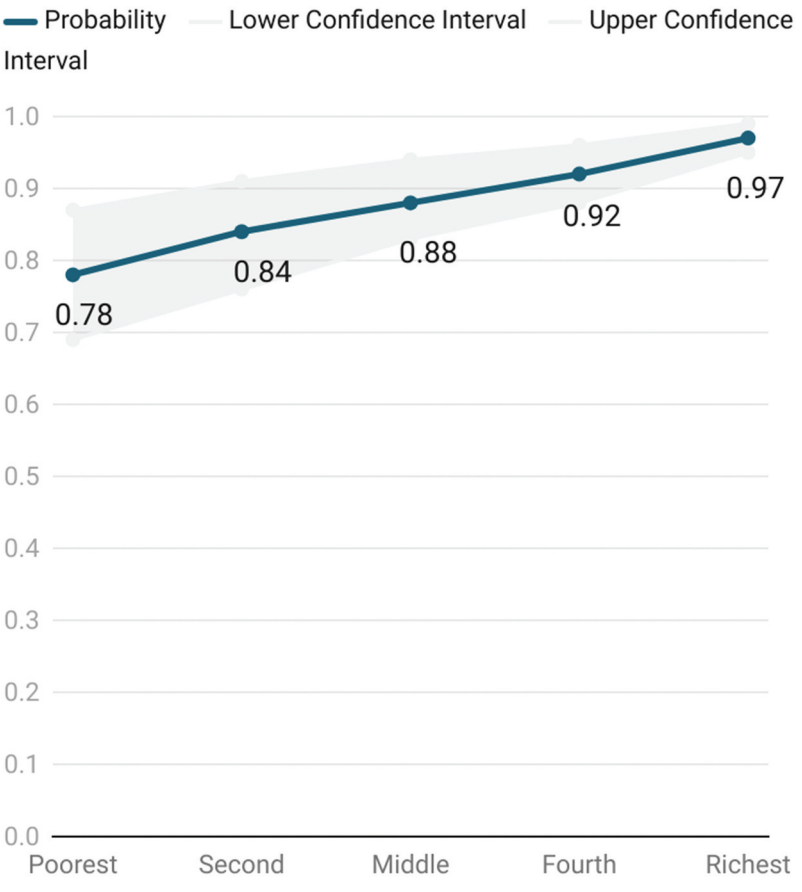

Figure 4. Predicted probability of ever attending school for non-fostered children, MICS 6 (2017–2018).

to parents, or it may be that fostering relieves pressure on resources allowing them to better cater for the children left behind, leaving everyone better off than if no child was fostered out. The findings highlight the importance of having social welfare systems institute or strengthen mechanisms to monitor the school attendance of children in informal fostering arrangements, particularly for those fostered to higher SES households. Further, social welfare systems could introduce support services to families in informal fostering arrangements to help promote the well-being and success of the children involved. The need for effective monitoring systems for school attendance of children in informal fostering arrangements is particularly important when they are placed with foster families of higher socioeconomic status, if these children may be at a greater risk of neglect or exploitation.

While the findings indicate that fostering is negatively correlated with school attendance in the most recent surveys conducted in the five countries used in this study, the cross-sectional nature of the dataset makes it impossible to establish causation, which is a limitation of the study. Further, the dataset does not provide information on how long fostered children have been living in their new households, which may be relevant for determining their educational outcomes.

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Notes on contributor

Pearl S. Kyei is a Lecturer at the Regional Institute for Population Studies, University of Ghana. She is a social demographer whose research interests lie primarily in studying human capital investments in sub-Saharan Africa and understanding social inequality. She is also interested in strengthening research capacity, improving the statistical literacy of data users, and promoting the uptake of research for decision-making, policy, and planning. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics from Davidson College, a Master of Arts degree in Demography from the University of Pennsylvania, and a PhD in Demography also from the University of Pennsylvania.

Data access statement

Research data supporting this publication are available from https://mics.unicef.org/surveys.

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