



## Foster parenting and the Abuse of the Girl Child in Selected Ebonyi State Communities

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### Abstract

*Foster parenting is a socially accepted practice in the society throughout sub-Saharan Africa which is often seen as a way of showing care but frequently exposes girl children to numerous forms of abuse. This work investigates the relationship between foster parenting arrangements and the abuse of the girl child in selected communities within Ebonyi State, south-eastern Nigeria. The research employed both qualitative and quantitative social research methods for data collection. Data were collected from 150 girl children aged 5 to 17 years and 42 key informants, including foster parents, community leaders, school teachers, and social workers. Structured questionnaire, in-depth and focus group discussion were used. The study used Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and feminist standpoint theory as theoretical base. Findings reveal that as much as 82% of foster girl children experienced two or more regular forms of abuse, including physical violence, emotional maltreatment, neglect, forced domestic labour, sexual abuse, and denial of educational access. Foster children living with relatives suffer high rates of neglect and labour exploitation, while formal foster homes recorded comparatively higher rates of sexual abuse. Factors, like poverty, patriarchy, cultural permissiveness, and institutional failure, were identified as key contribute factors. The study recommended fast policy reform, enhancing child protection frameworks, and culturally sensitive community interventions to alter the level of abuse within foster care systems in Ebonyi State and similar contexts across Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Foster Parenting, Girl Child Abuse, Child Protection, Ebonyi State, Medical Sociology

### Introduction

In most places in Africa, the care of children outside biological family units is not new and it is an accepted social practice. As a matter of fact it is a culturally permitted practice and more or less a way of life among people in the African society. Therefore it is as old as mankind itself. In Nigeria, and specifically in Igbo communities of Ebonyi State, foster parenting are of different forms: informal kinship or extended family fostering, traditional apprenticeship or child training, customary adoption, and statutory or formal fostering. The summary of this is that, children that lost their parents or children that have poor economic background are placed with relatives, friends, or acquaintances, in the aim of gaining better educational opportunities, vocational training, or improved standard of living. On the surface, such arrangements appear to reflect communal responsibility and altruistic care. On closer observation it is ridden with ills which has caught the research interest of sociologists and public health practitioners and there are giving it the research attention it requires. In the African foster parenting arrangements, the girl child is most vulnerable. Gendered roles with regards to domestic labour, obedience, and sexual availability in addition to weaknesses propelled by geographical isolation and social detachments from siblings in most cases fertilizes the social problem of. The existing body of literature has made open that foster children face serious exposure to violence, exploitation, and neglect in comparison with children raised in biological households (Akintunde & Fatoye, 2020; Dike, 2018; UNICEF



Nigeria, 2021). Yet in the study area which is Ebonyi state has not been sufficiently and scientifically examined.

This study, therefore, seeks to address the gap within the field of medical sociology. The study also examines the social, cultural, and structural conditions that make foster girl children in Ebonyi State susceptible to abuse. The emphasis therefore is on the social determinants of harm. Medical sociology shifts analytical focus from biological dimensions of harm to the social determinants that generate, sustain, and unevenly distribute injury across populations (Cockerham, 2021). Therefore Abuse as seen in this framework, is not a private misfortune but a socially formed action rooted in inequality, institutional failures, and cultural practices that normalize violence against women and girls. The central objectives of this study are: to find out the forms of abuse experienced by foster girl children in selected Ebonyi communities; to examine the relationship between the type of foster arrangement and the nature and frequency of abuse; to investigate the structural and cultural factors that mediate this relationship; and to propose evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice. In pursuing these objectives, the study contributes to broader scholarship on child welfare, gender, and social inequality in Nigeria and the global world.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks. The first is Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which conceptualizes child development and welfare as influenced by a series of interconnected environmental systems, ranging from the immediate surroundings as a product of the environmental system.

According to this framework:

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21) Applied to the present study, this framework focuses on the micro systemic dynamics of the foster household, the mesosystemic relationships between household and community, the exosystemic influences of poverty, labour markets, and social services, and the macro systemic cultural norms and legal frameworks that shape attitudes toward the girl child. Abuse, from this perspective, is never simply the product of individual pathology but is always embedded in and enabled by broader ecological conditions.

The second theoretical anchor is feminist standpoint theory, particularly as developed by Dorothy Smith (1987) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000). This perspective insists that knowledge about women's and girls' experiences must be grounded in those experiences themselves and must attend to the intersecting oppressions of gender, class, age, and ethnicity that structure social life. For this study, feminist standpoint theory provides the analytical tools to centre the voices of foster girl children, to take the accounts of their own suffering seriously, and to connect those individual experiences to broader patterns of structural inequality.

### **Literature Review**

The concept of fostering in Africa has been of great scholarly interest since the beginning of the mid-twentieth century. Anthropologists such as Esther Goody (1982) brought to light the widespread practice of child circulation in West Africa, arguing that it served important social



functions including the consolidation of kinship ties, the redistribution of labour, and the training of children across households. This interpretation, which emphasized the functional dimensions of fostering, shaped dominant academic discourse for several decades and, unfortunately, fertilized neglect of its potential disadvantages.

Recent research has faulted the functional assumption of the early scholars on the concentration of the positivity of the practice with empirical findings. . Studies conducted in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Benin, and Nigeria have consistently found that fostered children, particularly girls, are more likely than their non-fostered peers to experience physical punishment, sexual exploitation, educational deprivation, and psychological maltreatment (Akresh, 2009; Delap, 2011; Thorsen, 2012). In the Nigerian context, Dike (2018) found that over 60% of child domestic workers placed with non-biological households in Anambra State reported regular physical abuse, while more than 40% described experiences that met clinical definitions of psychological torture. These findings are consistent with those from Ebonyi State reported in a rapid assessment conducted by the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP, 2020), which identified the state as a significant source of trafficked domestic child workers, a substantial proportion of whom entered placement through informal foster arrangements.

The literature is broadly consistent in demonstrating that the experience of foster care varies based on gender. Boys placed in foster arrangements are more likely to experience physical abuse and forced agricultural labour, while girls face a wider and more varied spectrum of exploitation, including sexual abuse, domestic subjugation, emotional manipulation, and denial of education (Awusabo-Asare et al., 2004; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2012). This gendered patterning reflects broader social arrangements in which girls are assigned lower status, are expected to serve the needs of households, and are treated as economically productive assets whose labour is to be extracted and whose sexuality is to be managed or exploited by those in positions of authority.

In the Ebonyi context, these dynamics are further complicated by specific cultural practices. The tradition of *idunwa*, loosely translated as child keeping or child placement, has historically been used to distribute child-rearing responsibilities across extended family networks. While ideally this practice involves reciprocal obligations and emotional care, in contemporary practice it increasingly operates as a mechanism through which girl children are transferred to households.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The mixed methods approach was selected to enable both the measurement of the prevalence and patterning of abuse and the deeper interpretive understanding of the meanings, contexts, and structural conditions that shape those experiences. This methodological triangulation is particularly appropriate in sensitive research involving vulnerable populations, where quantitative data alone may not cover the complexity of lives experience, while qualitative data alone may lack the representational capacity necessary to support comprehensive research. The study was conducted in three local government areas (LGAs) of Ebonyi State: Afikpo North, Abakaliki, and Ikwo. These areas were selected purposively to capture variation across urban, periurban, and rural settings, and because preliminary fieldwork indicated that informal foster placement practices were particularly prevalent and visible in these communities. Ebonyi State, located in south-eastern Nigeria, is one of the country's



most economically disadvantaged states, with poverty rates consistently above the national average (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). This economic context is, as the findings below demonstrate, central to understanding the vulnerabilities of foster girl children in the region.

A total of 150 girl children aged 5 to 17 years currently living in foster arrangements were selected in the quantitative component of the study. Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling, facilitated by community gatekeepers, primary school teachers, and community health workers. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and the vulnerability of the population, considerable care was taken to ensure that children were not approached in the presence of their foster parents or care givers. For the qualitative component, 42 key informants were recruited: 15 foster parents, 10 community leaders and traditional title holders, 9 primary and secondary school teachers, and 8 social workers and child protection officers. In addition, three focus group discussions were conducted, comprising 6 to 8 participants drawn from community women's groups, youth organizations, and survivor support networks.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in Igbo and Nigerian Pidgin English by trained research assistants to ensure comprehension. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted by the principal investigator, and were audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants.

Ethical clearance was duly obtained. consent was obtained from all adult participants. For child participants, consent was obtained from their legal guardians or, where this was not possible without alerting potentially abusive caregivers, from school authorities and community leaders acting in loco parentis. Child participants were also asked to provide their own assent. All participants were guaranteed anonymity, and identifying information was removed from all data before analysis. A safeguarding protocol was in place throughout the fieldwork period, including referral pathways to the Ebonyi State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development for children identified as being in immediate danger. Quantitative data were entered into IBM SPSS Statistics 27 and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests of association. Qualitative data were transcribed, translated where necessary, and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for reflexive thematic analysis. Themes were generated inductively from the data and subsequently interpreted in dialogue with the theoretical framework described above.

## **Results**

### **Demographic Profile of Participants**

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 150 girl child participants. The largest cohort (44.7%) was aged between 10 and 14 years, with 30% aged 15 to 17 and 25.3% aged 5 to 9. Informal kinship care was the most common form of foster arrangement, accounting for 48% of placements, followed by formal foster homes (35.3%) and apprenticeship or domestic placement (16.7%). Female foster parents headed the majority of households (65.3%), and the largest proportion of children had been in placement between one and three years (42.7%).



**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Girl Child Participants (N = 150)**

Variable	Freq.	%	Cumulative %	Notes
Age of child (years)				
5 – 9	38	25.3	25.3	Largest cohort
10 – 14	67	44.7	70.0	
15 – 17	45	30.0	100.0	
Type of Foster Arrangement				
Informal kinship care	72	48.0	48.0	
Formal foster home	53	35.3	83.3	
Apprenticeship/domestic				
Gender of Foster Parent				
Female	98	65.3	65.3	
Male				
Couple	25	16.7	100.0	
Duration of placement (years)				
Less than 1 year	31	20.7	20.7	
1 - 3 years	64	42.7	63.3	
More than 3 years	55	36.7	100.0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

Note. Data collected through a structured questionnaire, 2023.

### Forms and Frequency of Abuse

Table 2 presents data on the forms and frequency of abuse reported by participants. Neglect emerged as the most prevalent single form of abuse, reported by 76.7% of participants, followed by emotional or psychological abuse (68.0%), verbal abuse and humiliation (64.0%), and physical abuse (59.3%). Sexual abuse was reported by 31.3% of participants, a figure that is seen as under reporting given the well-documented tendency of children and adolescents to underreport sexual victimisation, particularly in cultural contexts where shame and stigma attach to the victim rather than the perpetrator. Critically, 82% of participants reported experiencing two or more concurrent forms of abuse. Present the frequencies for formal and informal for clarity in Table 2.

**Table 2: Forms and Frequency of Abuse Among Foster Girl Children (N = 150)**

Form of Abuse	Freq.	%	% in Formal	% in Informal
Physical abuse	89	59.3	62.3	57.1
Emotional/psychological abuse	102	68.0	70.0	66.7
Sexual abuse	47	31.3	34.0	29.2
Neglect (food, education, health)	115	76.7	66.0	84.7
Forced/hazardous labour	78	52.0	41.5	60.4
Verbal abuse and humiliation	96	64.0	67.9	61.1
Denial of schooling	61	40.7	32.1	47.2
Multiple forms (2 or more)	123	82.0	79.2	84.0

Note. Percentages exceed 100% because participants could report multiple forms of abuse. Formal = formal foster homes; Informal = informal kinship care

### Variation by Type of Foster Arrangement

Cross-tabulation analysis revealed statistically significant differences in the types of abuse across foster arrangements (chi-square = 14.32, df = 4, p < .01). Children in informal kinship arrangements experienced significantly higher rates of neglect (84.7% versus 66.0%), forced labour (60.4% versus 41.5%), and denial of schooling (47.2% versus 32.1%). Children in formal foster homes, by contrast, reported comparatively higher rates of sexual abuse (34.0% versus 29.2%) and emotional abuse (70.0% versus 66.7%). These differences are consistent



with the qualitative data and reflect distinct structural logics operating within each arrangement type, as discussed further below. Present the matrix of the cross-tab.

### **Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative data provided rich contextual texture to the quantitative patterns. Five major themes emerged from the analysis: the normalisation of girl child labour; the silencing of abused children; institutional complicity and neglect; economic use of the girl child; and the lack of educational opportunity. Regarding the normalisation of labour exploitation, participants consistently described the expectation of intensive domestic work as taken for granted within their foster households. One 14-year-old participant, placed with a paternal aunt in Abakaliki, described her daily routine as follows (translated from Igbo):

‘I wake before 4 in the morning. I sweep the whole compound, fetch water from the well, and prepare akpu and soup for the family before they wake. After school, if I am even allowed to go, I clean again, cook again, and wash clothes. Sometimes I do not sleep until midnight. My aunty says this is what it means to be a child in someone's house. She says I should be grateful.’

This account brings out the rate to which the labour burden placed on foster girls is bigger anything that could be seen as domestic involvement of the child in house work and constitutes, in the terms of international child rights standards, hazardous and exploitative child labour. The phrase "someone's house" is a reminder to the girl in the foster home that she is gaining a privilege which must be serviced through domestic labour and other things as may be demanded by the home owners or face trouble. The silencing of abused children emerged as a critical structural mechanism enabling ongoing abuse. Several child participants described active and explicit instructions not to discuss their circumstances with teachers, community members, or anyone outside the household. A key informant interview with a primary school teacher in Ikwo LGA captured this dynamic vividly:

You can often identify foster children by the signs they carry they come to school hungry, or they have bruises they try to cover. When you ask them, they say nothing happened. They say they fell. They are afraid. Some of them have told me their madams warned them that if they talk, they will be sent back to their village in shame. For a child who has nothing, that threat is everything.

Institutional complicity took several forms in the data. Social workers in all three LGAs described caseloads so large as to make meaningful monitoring of foster placements difficult. One senior social worker noted:

‘We have perhaps one officer for every three communities. We do not have motorcycles for routine visits. By the time a complaint reaches us, the damage is already done. The system is not protecting these children. It is mere handling paperwork’.

Focus group participants from women's organisations were candid about the cultural permissiveness that surrounds the mistreatment of foster children. Several participants noted that community members who witnessed abuse were reluctant to intervene, citing norms of non-interference in other people's family matters. As one participant stated: "People say it is not your child, so it is not your business. But every child is everyone's business. We have lost sight of that."

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study call for enduring critical attention. The prevalence of abuse among foster girl children in Ebonyi State is not merely high; it is systemic, multi-dimensional, and



structurally reproduced. That 82% of participants experienced two or more concurrent forms of maltreatment suggests not isolated incidents of individual cruelty but a patterned social phenomenon in which the girl child's body, labour, and future are treated as disposable resources to be extracted by those with authority over her.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework helps to account for the layered character of this vulnerability. At the microsystemic level, individual households constitute immediate sites of abuse, characterised by extreme power asymmetries between foster parents and the girl children in their care. At the mesosystemic level, the relationships between households, schools, and communities are marked by silence, complicity, and normalisation. Teachers observe the signs of abuse but lack the authority, resources, or institutional support to act. Community members witness exploitation but defer to cultural norms of non-interference. At the exosystemic level, the chronic underfunding and understaffing of child protection services means that the state apparatus charged with safeguarding children is structurally weakened. At the macrosystemic level, patriarchal cultural norms that assign low value to the girl child, combined with poverty that renders families and communities dependent on child labour, create the enabling conditions within which all other forms of abuse are made possible.

The feminist standpoint perspective further illuminates why it is specifically the girl child who bears the heaviest burden within foster arrangements. Girls are perceived as economically useful (as domestic labourers), as sexually available (to male members of the foster household), and as socially unimportant (relative to boys whose education is prioritised). These perceptions are not aberrations; they are the logical expressions of deeply entrenched patriarchal systems that have been insufficiently disrupted by formal legal frameworks or development interventions. The findings here echo and amplify those of Twum-Danso Imoh (2012) and Akintunde and Fatoye (2020), situating Ebonyi State within a regional and continental pattern of gendered child maltreatment within foster care systems. The differential patterning of abuse across arrangement types is theoretically significant. The higher rates of neglect and labour exploitation in informal kinship care may reflect the absence of formal oversight, the greater intimacy of demands that kin feel able to make on placed children, and the economic pressures that motivate informal placements in the first place. The higher rates of sexual abuse in formal foster homes, while counterintuitive, may reflect the presence of non-kin male members of the household who do not experience the incest taboo that operates, however imperfectly, in biological family settings. These findings suggest that reform efforts must be tailored to the specific risks associated with different arrangement types rather than treating foster care as a homogeneous category.

## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that foster parenting in Ebonyi State is, for a significant majority of girl children who experience it, not a form of care but a mechanism of exploitation and harm. The data presented here reveal a crisis of child protection operating at multiple levels, that is, simultaneously individual, communal, institutional, and structural. At individual level, children are directly experiencing abuse and neglect. At the community level, such harm is often normalised and sustained through silence and collective inaction. Institutionally, agencies responsible for child welfare are constrained by inadequate resources, limited authority, and weak enforcement capacity. Structurally, broader forces—poverty, patriarchy, and inequality—create an environment in which these harms persist and, for many girls, become difficult to escape.



Medical sociology, with its insistence on attending to the social determinants of health and harm, offers a particularly appropriate lens through which to understand and address this crisis. The suffering documented in this study is not natural, not inevitable, and not acceptable. It is produced by identifiable social forces, and it can be dismantled through targeted social interventions. The recommendations that follow are offered in that spirit.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and discussion presented above, this study makes the following recommendations directed at different levels of the ecological system.

At the level of policy and legislation, the Child Rights Act must be domesticated in Ebonyi State with urgency and political commitment. The state government should allocate a dedicated budget line for child protection services, with a minimum staffing ratio of one social worker per 500 households in high-risk communities. The Ebonyi State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development should establish a mandatory foster care registration and monitoring system, with scheduled and unannounced home visits to all registered foster placements at intervals not exceeding six months.

At the level of community practice, community-based child protection committees should be established in each ward across the state. These committees should include women leaders, religious figures, teachers, and youth representatives, and should be empowered to receive and act upon complaints related to child maltreatment. A community education campaign, developed in collaboration with Igbo cultural organisations, should work explicitly to denormalise the exploitation of foster girl children and to reconstruct idunwa as a practice of genuine care rather than labour extraction.

At the level of institutional capacity, the State Ministry of Education should establish a mandatory reporting protocol requiring teachers and school administrators to report suspected cases of child abuse to designated child protection focal persons in each LGA. Training in child protection and trauma-informed practice should be incorporated into the pre-service and in-service training curricula for teachers, social workers, and community health workers throughout the state.

At the level of research, further studies are needed to track the long-term health and developmental outcomes of abused foster girl children in Ebonyi State, to assess the effectiveness of community-based interventions, and to examine the role of digital platforms and mobile health technologies in improving access to reporting mechanisms for vulnerable children. Longitudinal and action research designs would be particularly valuable in building the evidence base necessary to sustain policy change.

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