



Beyond *men pikin*: improving understanding of post-conflict child fostering in Sierra Leone

By Lacey Andrews Gale

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Boy on the street, Freetown, Sierra Leone, Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Photograph by Lacey Andrews Gale.

Executive Summary

There is growing agreement that separated children are best cared for in community settings, rather than in institutions.¹ However, even in a community setting, there is a need for standards of care that allow for monitoring of children's well-being. This is particularly

important in countries such as Sierra Leone which is recovering from a brutal civil war and suffering from poverty, malnutrition, and limited access to adequate medical care. Since the civil war ended in Sierra Leone, child fostering—whether informal or facilitated by humanitarian agencies and the government—has become the preferred solution for the estimated 800,000+ orphaned, abandoned, and vulnerable children.²

¹ Tolfree, David. 2003. Community Based Care for Separated Children, Stockholm, Save the Children, Sweden. <http://www.aidsalliance.org/graphics/OVC/documents/0000757e00.pdf>

² UNICEF Sierra Leone 2007. Annual Report. http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/WCARO_

Lacey Andrews Gale received her PhD in Cultural Anthropology and Population Studies from Brown University. She is a researcher at the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University and a former research consultant with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Guinea, Sierra Leone. Comments on this paper are welcome and encouraged: lacey.gale@tufts.edu

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Interviews with care-givers, foster children, humanitarian agencies, and government officials paint a picture of a formal foster care system that lacks common standards or functioning monitoring mechanisms. These gaps in child protection are also apparent in the kind of informal fostering arrangements found throughout West Africa. This study evaluates the current state of child fostering in Sierra Leone and poses questions for future research which is necessary in order to improve knowledge and develop recommendations for national foster care standards—which could be potentially replicable across West Africa.

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I. Background

Informal child fostering was widespread before civil wars ripped apart the West African nations of Sierra Leone, Liberia,



Foster Children in Boreah refugee camp, Guinea. Photograph by Kate Lapidès.

and Côte d'Ivoire.³ In Sierra Leone, the war resulted in displacement on a massive scale and altered the social fabric of the country. Despite this upheaval of families and communities, research conducted among Sierra Leoneans in Guinean refugee camps revealed the continued importance of fostering practices even during conflict. Children were sent from refugee camps in Guinea to kin in Sierra Leone in order to assure proper acculturation and strengthen kinship ties.⁴ Fostering was also used

³ Sierra Leone's 1974 census showed that 29 percent of Sierra Leonean children whose mothers were aged 15-19 were not living with their mothers. 36 percent of children born to mothers 20-24 years of age were also living away from home. For women aged 25-29 and 30-34 years, the proportions of children away increase to 40 percent and 46 percent respectively. These figures indicate high rates of 'out migration' of children at relatively young ages (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985: 61). These figures varied greatly by region and ethnic group with the south and east of the country reporting almost double the rates of out-fostering in the north. Ainsworth (1996: 25) reports that in Côte d'Ivoire in 1985 one-fifth of non-orphaned children age 7-14 were living away from both natural parents. Comparable data is not available from either the 1985 or 2004 censuses.

⁴ Gale, Lacey Andrews. 2006. "Sustaining Relationships across Borders. Gendered

within the camp to strengthen social ties and relieve burdens on large and poorer families.

The war left a large number of children without primary caregivers or the ability to return 'home'. A recent UNICEF report estimates that of the 2.3 million children in Sierra Leone (who make up nearly 50% of the total population) 11.3% are orphans and 27% are vulnerable.⁵ Currently both formal and informal fostering practices are employed by the state and by Sierra Leoneans to address the needs of these orphans and vulnerable children. While there are no reliable figures as to the current number of foster children, Sierra Leoneans from all walks of life emphasized repeatedly in interviews that fostering touches every family in the country. Fostering has become of increasing interest to post-conflict child protection policy-makers as displaced and separated children, children who served the fighting forces, and those who were rejected by their communities for a range of reasons related to their involvement in the war, have found new homes with foster parents. The system of child fosterage is also of increas-

Livelihoods and Mobility among Sierra Leonean Refugees", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 25:2, pp 69-80.

⁵ UNICEF Sierra Leone 2007. Annual Report. http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/WCARO_SL_Pub_AnnualRprt07.pdf



Monument at the entry into Koidu town, Sierra Leone. Photograph by Kate Lapidés.

ing interest in parts of Africa where AIDS is devastating adult populations and children are forced into novel living arrangements.⁶

Despite this interest on the part of the state and various child protection agencies in supporting ‘traditional’ child fostering practices, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) and humanitarian agencies lack evidence about current informal child care practices and thus cannot assess how these practices support or threaten children’s well being. Guidelines for care are based on international standards and policies of individual international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) policy, rather than national guidelines or local realities.

⁶ Shepler, Susan. 2005. *Transnational Fosterage of War-affected Children in West Africa: Immediate Coping Capacities across Borders* UNICEF field report.

II. Methods

The three-week rapid assessment employed ethnographic methods of data collection. These included:

- life-history interviews with key informants
- interviews with staff of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children’s Affairs (MSWGCA), the Sierra Leone Police’s Family Support Unit, and key child-focused INGOs
- focus groups and informal interviews with children and adults in the capital, Freetown and in Makeni, the largest city in the Northern Province
- participant observation at formal events and in households.

The fieldwork took place in June 2007 under the auspices of the Faith Alliance against Slavery and Trafficking (FAAST)⁷, a branch of World Hope International and World Relief, whose offices are based in Freetown. While most of the research was undertaken in Freetown, five days were spent in Makeni interviewing humanitarian workers, government officials, the local Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police, children, and village committees.

The following questions provided a guide for interviews and focus groups:

- What is the range of residential arrangements for foster children in Sierra Leone; both local and supported by international agencies?
- Do Sierra Leoneans view as acceptable living conditions (work, play, school,

⁷ www.faastinternational.org

nutrition, emotional) in fostering situations from the perspectives of both the caregivers and the child?

- How do these compare to standards set by Sierra Leonean law?

The research findings are a mixture of case studies that emerged from interviews and participant observation with foster parents and foster children, official documents and interviews, descriptions of current INGO programs and policies, and protection gaps identified by humanitarian workers and government officials. Together the findings paint a preliminary portrait of child fostering in Sierra Leone and provide a starting point for further research.

A vital aspect throughout the research process was engagement with child protection agencies and the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL). A collaborative, 'how-can-we-make-it-better' approach made it possible to establish current knowledge and policies pertaining to child fostering and child trafficking. It also opened up possibilities for discussing the results of the research, formulating recommendations, and promoting collaboration and support for future projects.

III. Formal and Informal Foster Care

There are several types of formal and informal systems of foster care in Sierra Leone. Formal fostering practices are described in the 2007 Child Rights Act⁸ and are supposed to be monitored by the MSWGCA. Formal fostering arrangements are used for adjudicated youth (a young person found guilty of an adult crime and designed as a delinquent by a judge), street children who cannot be reunified with their families, survivors of human trafficking, and survivors of domestic abuse. There are also institutional arrangements such as orphanages and short-term residential programs for street children, but these are not considered to be fostering.

Formal fostering is relatively rare compared with *men pikin*, the term used in Krio—the lingua franca used throughout

Sierra Leone—for informal child fostering, a practice which affects every extended family in the country. *Men pikin* primarily entails a child receiving formal education or an apprenticeship outside the family. Due to the scarcity of secondary schools in villages, certain age groups of children are fostered by extended family or friends in towns and cities.

The following sections describe the range of fostering arrangements in greater detail.

Formal fostering and monitoring mechanisms

There are several levels of national and local government bodies involved with child fostering. The MSWGCA is the official government body charged with ensuring the provision of services to socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and advocating on their behalf for resources and legal standards. They are also charged with the overall supervision and monitoring of foster care. Local-level child monitoring supposedly takes place through child welfare committees (CWCs)—voluntary organizations organized by village heads and assisted by a social welfare officer from the MSWGCA. Also included in the CWC are traditional leaders, two representatives of parents, one male and one female representative of children, three service providers, two NGO representatives, and three religious leaders. The Ministry's mandate is to monitor, supervise and coordinate the activities of CWCs. CWCs' responsibilities include:

- determining the suitability of a person to foster a child
- monitoring all foster placements within the village
- offering advice to children, parents and other community members in order to promote the short- and long-term best interests of the child.

While the CWCs are supposed to monitor foster placements, they do not have jurisdiction over cases involving sexual assault. Cases of that nature are referred to the Sierra Leone Police, who maintain a Family Support Unit (FSU) at each police station which works with alleged juvenile

offenders and child victims of domestic violence as well as monitoring proven child abusers. In interviews with the Makeni representatives of the MSWGCA, FSU, and Defense for Children International (an INGO providing legal representation for children in contact with the law as victims or abusers) it appears that most cases go through what is known as a "diversion" process, rather than being referred to the formal legal system. "Diversion" operates through customary channels of authority and often involves monetary remuneration for crimes committed. It is not clear how the cases of foster children are handled in this system.

There are clearer standards of child care in residential programs and orphanages. Orphanages are currently of great concern to the GoSL and INGOs, due to recent allegations of fraudulent transnational adoptions involving orphanages as well as the proliferation of unlicensed 'internet orphanages' which recruit local children in order to solicit funds from international donors.⁹ The MSWGCA has a list of five officially-licensed orphanages and are supposedly investigating and attempting to close down those not on their list. The Chief Social Development Officer (CSDO) of the MSWGCA explained that orphanages in Sierra Leone are supposed to abide by guidelines that stipulate particular standards for facilities, child/staff ratios, education, basic standards of nutrition, health care, and sanitation, recreation, record-keeping, and reintegration policies. There was no printed copy of these guidelines available and it appears that many institutions follow their own standards.

Standards for formal foster care facilitated by the MSWGCA were also only verbally described during interviews. It was also difficult to assess the current level of active monitoring of child care cases. The MSWGCA's Social Welfare Division is supposed to have a formal procedure and regular follow-up for these fostering arrangements. However, the only printed document readily available regarding

⁹ In view of this concern, the Chief Social Development Officer for MSWGCA's Social Welfare Division, together with humanitarian organizations, initially assumed that this research project concerned standards for children's well-being in orphanages

⁸ www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2007-7p.pdf

foster care was a questionnaire used by an INGO, Don Bosco Fambul, for their foster program follow-up visits. This MSWGCA-approved foster care follow-up form was jointly developed by their Child Welfare Secretariat and UNICEF. MSWGCA officials stated that they have difficulty monitoring fostering activities due to insufficient resources.

Don Bosco Fambul coordinates a nine-month residential program in Freetown for street children and is the only agency fostering children with the agreement of the MSWGCA. Other agencies, such as GOAL Ireland, have made fostering placements in the past and would like to create fostering opportunities for the street children they now work with now. However, they are reluctant to do so in the current unregulated environment. According to the GoSL's 2005 Anti-Human Trafficking Act¹⁰, the mistreatment of children in fostering situations can be prosecuted as a domestic trafficking case when exploitation is proven to have taken place. Without legal standards for foster care in place, there is no legal protection for INGOs who engage in child fostering. Following passage of the 2007 Child Rights Act, there is the possibility of creating legal standards that will protect both foster children and the agencies that foster the children. It is unclear, however, who will champion their creation and enforcement.

Men pikin or informal fostering

It is commonly said by Sierra Leoneans that “there are no orphans in Sierra Leone.” As part of extended family or other types of networks many Sierra Leoneans foster children who became separated from their parents or whose parents died during the war. Fostering is also perceived as a way for families to help their children become educated, improve their chances for an advantageous marriage, learn a trade, and become ‘civilized’ by living in an urban or peri-urban environment. The fear that children may die as a result of witchcraft may also encourage parents to find alternative homes for their children. A fostering arrangement may also take place between an infertile woman and a female relative,

where one or more children will be given to the woman to raise as her own. Indeed, it is often ‘special’ children who are fostered because they are bright, beautiful, and seen as having promise for future success. One former foster child describes how she came to be sent to her aunt’s home for her schooling.

*Growing up in the village with six wives and plenty children, it is not too easy to show your love to one person. I was the beloved because I was sent to town to go to school. It was like when you send one thousand with the hope of receiving one million and that one million will be utilized on the family. That was my father’s hope. I strained to achieve something.*¹¹

Fostering is also seen as a way of toughening up children, of forcing them to be independent and self-reliant from a young age so that they will be able to succeed no matter what the situation. Another former foster child describes why his father sent him to a Quranic school before the war and why he thinks that fostering is an important practice, despite the difficulties for the child:

*Even if the children would like to be with their parents, the parents prefer for the children to go and have education with another people. By getting a family to foster a child, the child will not ask some one to take care of him in the future. The parents will say: “If this child is away he might learn something.” My father, he would say, “If you have your child with you, you will not teach him how to struggle when you are not there.”*¹²

Many foster children will say that they are not happy in their immediate living situation; but that they are there to sacrifice for their family and that the suffering will make them stronger and more resilient to future challenges. These findings echo Caroline Bledsoe’s pre-conflict research on

child fostering among the Mende—one of Sierra Leone’s dominant ethnic groups—which revealed that Mende culture sanctions the less favorable treatment of fostered children. There may even be a positive value to this differential treatment, for the Mende have a proverb that there is “no success without hardship”¹³

Informants described a range of factors that determine the success or failure of an informal fostering arrangement. The agreement between the child’s guardian and the foster parent can vary greatly, from the parent providing financial support and visiting to having no contact at all. The range of parents’ involvement in their child’s fostering experience and the type of relationship that exists between the sending and receiving family greatly affects the success of the relationship. Stranger care is becoming more common in the post-war setting, which leads to an attenuated sense of responsibility for foster children’s well being. There may also be a large discrepancy between what is agreed upon and what actually happens. A child’s gender may affect his/her chances of getting an education, working in the house, or becoming a street child. Whatever the pretext or arrangements made for fostering children, it became clear through interviews with Sierra Leoneans as well as INGO workers that the fostering situation can be very difficult for the children and in some cases may result in abuse and exploitation of the child’s labor for domestic duties, market activities, and commercial sex work.

The child may be educated and also expected to perform domestic duties or ‘light’ child labor. This would be considered a successful arrangement. In other situations, the child may be educated, but be abused emotionally, physically, and required to do long hours of work in potentially hazardous situations. On the far end of the spectrum, there are children who do not receive an education, who are involved in the worst forms of child labor, who are at risk of being trafficked either internally or internationally, and who may be sexually exploited by a foster sibling, parent or relative. Some

¹⁰ www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2005-7p.pdf

¹¹ Interview 06.13.2007, translated from Krio by Abdurahim Barrie.

¹² Interview 06.01.2007, translated from Krio by Abdurahim Barrie.

¹³ Bledsoe, Caroline. 1990. “No Success Without Struggle”: Social Mobility and Hardship for Foster Children in Sierra Leone.” *Man*, vol 25. no.1 pp. 70-88.

children end up on the streets rather than remain in a situation where they are not being fed, are overworked, and not shown affection. Some children also end up on the streets because they cannot repay a debt and are told not to come back until they have the money to do so.

While the extended family system functions as a stop-gap for vulnerable children and families without the means to support their children through school, the current economic climate in Sierra Leone makes it challenging for foster parents to support their own children, let alone a foster child. A. Kamara works for an INGO and earns roughly \$70 per month, which is an excellent salary in a country whose per capita gross national income (GNI) is estimated at \$240¹⁴ and in which over the half the population lives on less than \$1 per day.¹⁵ She is a single parent to her son, fosters ten children, and cares for her mother and sister and her sister's three children. It is a constant struggle to balance the needs of her family and foster children. She admits that she favors some children over others:

Now that I am a mother, I think it is half-part of my heart that is put to my child and that relationship. That part of your heart is in your child will be different with the other [foster children] even though you will love them. Though you will care for them that deep love is always with the one you delivered. I am a foster parent. I know what I am saying.¹⁶

IV. Conclusions and Questions

An examination of child fostering practices illuminates the effects of conflict on the social fabric of relationships in Sierra Leone. Analyzing these impacts requires not only examining the fall-out from years of violence and displacement, but

also the profound influence of INGO and UN policies and practices on post-conflict society. Pre-war child fostering was based upon ties of kinship and patronage—which connected the sender and receiver of children into a mutually beneficial relationship that offered some protection to children with inbuilt checks and balances of power. However, the case studies of current fostering practices which emerge from this preliminary assessment reveal that continuity in children's well-being from pre to post-war fostering should not be assumed.

The shift in policy away from institutional care for orphaned and vulnerable children and towards community and foster-based is based on assumptions that pre-war and post-war fostering serve the same social function. It is assumed they contain the same in-built protections for children and therefore provide a viable alternative for orphaned and vulnerable children. Guidelines for care of children in foster situations are based on standards enshrined in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)¹⁷ as well as international and local NGO policies, rather than based on local realities or national guidelines. Assigning primacy to individual rights of children in a social context where children's primary responsibilities are to support the welfare of the family—often at significant personal cost—may have unintended consequences that jeopardize children's futures. It is clear that more needs to be understood about the relationship between local practices and international standards.

The final section outlines a series of questions that will frame the next stage of research. Should funding be obtained, we intend to undertake a comparative study of fostering practices in several rural sending communities across Sierra Leone which will be linked to a detailed analysis of the conditions and relationships of foster children in Freetown and two other urban sites.

1. What does fostering look like in Sierra Leone?

- How do Sierra Leoneans define successful fostering arrangements?
- What is discussed when a child is sent to another family in terms of compensation,

visits, standards of care, and expectations for schooling?

- How do families find out if their child is being mistreated?
- Are there consequences if the child is mistreated?
- What do parents do if the child is mistreated? What do the customary and judicial legal systems offer for parents?
- Who do children call upon for help and support when they are mistreated?
- What are the different kinds of relationships between sending and receiving families?
- Is there a connection between parental support for their children (monetary, emotional) and positive/negative outcomes of fostering?
- What are the factors behind some fostering relationships having positive results? (i.e. the child finishes school, has enough to eat and decent living conditions, and is resilient to adverse circumstances)
- What are the factors behind some fostering relationships resulting in abuse and neglect?
- What factors erode the child's well-being?
- How does this differ/concur with definitions set out by humanitarian and government organizations?
- What are characteristics of resilient children?
- What happens to children abused in fostering situations?
- What is the scale of 'informal' fostering in Sierra Leone?
- What is the scale of 'formal' and 'informal' foster placements which are considered 'successful'?
- What can be learned by comparing fostering practices in Sierra Leone with

¹⁴ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GNIPC.pdf>

¹⁵ http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_SLE.html

¹⁶ Interview 06.12.2007, A. Kamara.

¹⁷ www.unicef.org/crc



Child of girl mother abducted by the RUF, Kono, Sierra Leone. Photography by Kate Lapidès.

kinship-based care practices in other countries?

2. Is it possible to create child well-being standards which reflect the capacity and priorities of parents in Sierra Leone and also protect the child?

- Do national standards reach the average parent?
- Do child well-being standards address the root causes of child abuse and neglect?
- Would codified child fostering standards increase children's well-being in fostering situations?
- How could standards be used as a tool to educate Sierra Leoneans about the potential dangers of child fostering?
- Would child care standards articulate with the guidelines set out in the Child Rights Act, the CRC, the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*,¹⁸

the *Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children*¹⁹, and other relevant international laws and principles?

- How can intangibles such as emotional support be incorporated into well-being standards?
- Would setting 'legal' standards also reduce the incidence of 'informal fostering' and therefore also its potential or perceived benefits for families?

3. What mechanisms would need to be put into place at various levels (state, region, community, traditional leaders) in order for these standards to be effective?

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of current monitoring mechanisms?
- Who are the appropriate government officials and traditional leaders to involve both at the state, regional level, and local

levels particularly in light of the current decentralization campaign?

- Should there be different standards in rural and urban areas?



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**Feinstein International Center
200 Boston Avenue, Suite 4800
Medford, Massachusetts 02155 USA
(617) 627-3423**

¹⁸ www1.umn.edu/humanrts/africa/afchild.htm

¹⁹ www.unhcr.ch/include/fckeditor/custom/File/Protection/IAPUnaccompaniedChildren_e.pdf