

Experiences of Formal Foster Parents in Ghana: Motivations and Challenges

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Abstract

In Ghana, the reform of the child welfare system is shifting the care of orphans and vulnerable children from residential care to foster care. However, the system has faced difficulties in recruiting foster parents. Therefore, this qualitative research explored the motivations and challenges of foster parents in Accra, Ghana. A total of 15 foster parents took part in semi-structured interviews that were analysed using an inductive thematic approach. The study found that the participants undertook the role of fostering because of their love for children, religious and social obligations, and satisfaction of personal goals. Challenges experienced by the foster parents included stigma, financial challenges, and emotional issues as a result of fostering children. The recommendations of the study which aim to help in dealing with the challenges that confront foster parents include the provision of financial resources, sensitisation campaigns to reduce the stigma, and the creation of foster parent associations to help with the emotional issues.

Keywords: Ghana; foster care; children; motivation; challenges; child welfare reform

Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, the demand for foster parents is increasing because of the growing number of children living without adequate parental care (Drah 2012, 3). In Ghana, an estimated 17 per cent of children were not living with either of their



biological parents in 2015 (Better Care Network and UNICEF 2015). The norm in Ghana has been that relatives and community members informally take on temporary or long-term parenting responsibilities for orphans and vulnerable children who need alternative care (Ariyo, Mortelmans, and Wouters 2019).

However, the growing levels of poverty, HIV/AIDS, and rapid rural-urban migration in Ghana have undermined the ability and commitment of relatives to take on the care of children who have been separated from their parents (Imoh 2012, 360). Research suggests that these factors plus the lack of support from the state are exposing many of the children in kinship care to abuse and exploitation (Kuyini et al. 2009, 448). Challenges within informal foster care have prompted the need for new mechanisms to care for vulnerable children which for most of them is placement in residential care (Frimpong-Manso 2017).

Similar to other African countries, Ghana is reforming its child welfare system to shift from residential care to family-based options such as foster care (Frimpong-Manso 2014, 402). However, the country is struggling to attract and recruit interested and competent people to become foster parents. Apart from cultural barriers that prevent people from taking in unrelated children, the child welfare system also lacks proper mechanisms and structures (for example, financial resources, and a trained workforce) needed to recruit, select, train and support foster parents (Laird 2008). As of 2013, only 93 foster parents were registered by the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) in Ghana (Better Care Network and UNICEF 2015). Despite the barriers to foster care, little is known about the reasons why some people opt to foster unrelated children in Ghana and other developing countries (George, Oudenhoven, and Wazir 2003, 343).

The aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate the experiences of foster parents in Ghana. Specifically, it seeks to understand the motivations of the foster parents and the challenges that they face in undertaking this role. We summarise the international literature on the motivation and challenges that face foster parents and describe the foster care system in Ghana. Then we give details about the methodology. After that, we present the findings of the study, discussion and recommendations. The study generates practical implications for policy and practice as it aids in understanding the factors that influence the recruitment and retention of foster parents in Ghana.

Literature Review

Motivations for Fostering

People who volunteer to foster children have various motivations for undertaking this role. A review of the international research, especially from countries in the US, Europe, and Australia, reveals that child-centred reasons rooted in altruism are usually the primary motivation for people who engage in fostering (Canali, Maurizio, and Vecchiato 2016, 9; De Maeyer et al. 2013, 148; López and Del Valle 2016, 126;

McHugh 2006). These altruistic motivations include providing children with love, a safe place to call home and protection from maltreatment (Blythe, Wilkes, and Halcomb 2014, 28). Some foster parents, especially those without their own children, have self-oriented intrinsic motivations which include the desire to have more children, provide a sibling for their child, and companionship (Kozlova 2013; Migliorini et al. 2018, 514; Neagoe, Neag, and Lucheuş 2019, 6).

Especially in collectivist societies, people become foster parents out of a sense of responsibility to support children in need of care within their communities (Diogo and Branco 2017, 4; Jose et al. 2018, 138). A Turkish study involving 124 foster parents found that 76 per cent of them viewed providing foster care as a form of social responsibility (Vural et al. 2014, 572). The rewards derived from caring for children, the need to replace biological children or the inability to have children have all been identified as reasons for fostering children (Muchinako, Mpambela, and Muzingili 2018, 41). For example, stringent laws in Japan that protect parents' rights to custody mean there are few children available for adoption. Thus, many people who have difficulty adopting a child opt for foster parenting to satisfy their quest for parenthood. Religious beliefs of religious organisations such as Islam and Christianity which sanction its members to provide for orphaned, abandoned and poor children have been identified as a motivating factor for people to foster children not genetically related to them (Megahead 2008, 38; Omori 2016, 216). The advantage of having religiously motivated foster parents is that it promotes prosocial behaviour. Also, the placements can be strengthened because the religious organisations through which the foster parents are recruited provide informal prescreening, social support and monitoring (Gray 2006, 40).

While studies from Australia and Canada suggest that financial motivation and possible monetary barriers do not play a significant role in people's motives to become foster parents (Randle et al. 2012; Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied 2006), findings from small qualitative studies in low-resourced African and Asian societies show they are essential motivators for would-be foster parents (Ntshongwanga and Tanga 2018, 17; Rochat, Mokomane, and Mitchell 2016, 122). Apart from the monthly allowance helping to provide for the foster children's basic needs, it also serves a needed income for some financially constrained families. For example, there is frequently a waiting list of women wanting to be foster parents in Guatemala because it enables them to earn an income in a country with a precarious economic situation. Evidence from the African continent has shown that countries like South Africa have a vibrant foster care system because of the grant paid to foster parents. Other countries in Africa and Asia that are developing their foster care system are also paying small monthly allowances to attract potential parents (Flagothier 2016, 27; Milligan et al. 2016, 36).

Challenges Encountered by Foster Parents

Foster parents, especially those that provide long-term care, are encouraged to form strong attachments with their foster child (Gribble 2016, 113). As a result, they suffer loss and grief when the child leaves their home at the end of the placement (Hebert, Kulkin, and Mclean 2013, 259; Lynes and Siteo 2019, 26). This situation is worse for foster parents who have the expectation of adopting the child that is in their temporary care or those who consider themselves parents rather than professionals providing a service (Schofield et al. 2013, 50).

Many foster children have mental health issues and experiences of trauma which lead them to display challenging and disruptive behaviours including substance abuse and inappropriate sexual behaviour (Mnisi and Botha 2016, 226; Turney and Wildeman 2016, 2). Foster parents struggle to cope with these behaviours because of the lack of skills and therapeutic support, resulting in empathetic exhaustion and high levels of stress (Hannah and Woolgar 2018, 185; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France 2010, 156–157). The high burden of care for foster parents contributes to placement breakdown and reduces foster parent retention (Khoo and Skoog 2013, 255).

In Australia and South Africa, foster parents do not get the necessary interventions (for example, financial, emotional, and training) to support them to carry out their responsibilities owing to different factors including the high workload of social workers and lack of resources (Böning and Ferreira 2013; Samrai, Beinart, and Harper 2011, 45). The fees and allowances provided for meeting the direct costs of foster children and any indirect costs such as lost income and time costs are inadequate (McHugh 2006). Foster parents feel dissatisfied with their role because they are undervalued in the care system owing to their status as volunteers, thereby affecting their access to support systems (Colton, Roberts, and Williams 2008, 871; López and Del Valle 2016, 126). Foster parents often face stigma which forces them to hide their status as foster parents owing to the perceived consequences of social isolation (Blythe et al. 2012).

Foster Care System in Ghana

The foster care system in Ghana is regulated by the Children's Act, 1998 (Act No. 560 of 1998), the Children's (Amendment) Act, 2016 (Act No. 937 of 2016), and the Foster Care Regulations of 2018. The DSW is the statutory agency responsible for implementing foster care, but owing to the lack of resources, it collaborates with private agencies to undertake this role (Ulrike 2013). According to the said Children's Amendment Act, foster care in the Ghanaian context is a temporary alternative measure for children with the goal of family reunification or adoption. Potential foster parents should be at least 21 years old, of high moral character (no criminal record) and in good health. Applicants can be married or single, but an unmarried male applicant cannot foster a female child (Frimpong-Manso 2014). Foster parents can be assigned to one or more children (maximum of six) who are not related by blood, marriage or adoption.

Foster parenting in Ghana is purely voluntary, and there is no provision for direct financial support to foster families (Frimpong-Manso and Mawudoku 2017). The qualification for becoming foster parents is based on the morality of the persons and their financial ability to take care of children.

Research Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative design was adopted as it provided the researchers with the opportunity to gain an insight into the experiences of foster parents (Hammarberg, Kirkman, and De Lacey 2016). The chosen approach assisted the researchers in getting rich descriptions of the participants' articulation from their habitat.

Sampling and Recruitment of Participants

The participants were recruited from a private fostering agency in Accra, Ghana (Better Care Network and UNICEF 2015). Since its inception in 2011, the agency has trained 82 foster parents and placed 20 children. The agency recruits prospective foster parents through sensitisation workshops and public speaking in churches and community associations. Potential foster parents go through interviews, orientation sessions, home visits and an evaluation by the organisation's caseworkers to determine their eligibility and qualification to foster.

The researchers approached the foster parents of the agency to inform them about the study, its purpose and the procedures to be used. To be eligible for the study, the participants should have had at least one year's experience of being foster parents. The sampling criterion was to make sure that the participants who took part in the research had enough experience and knowledge to share (Creswell 2012). We obtained a current list of 63 foster parents from Bethany. Out of this number, 30 met the selection criteria and 15 accepted taking part in the study.

Of the 15 foster parents, 4 were men and 11 women. They ranged in age from 31 to 70, with most of them within the age bracket of 41–50. Most of the foster parents (60%) had primary or secondary school qualifications. A total of 40 per cent of the participants were married and the rest were divorced, single, or widowed. Apart from four participants, the others worked in informal sector jobs such as dressmaking and petty trading. Eleven participants were living with their biological children (average of three children). A total of 87 per cent of the participants had, on average, been foster parents for 2 years and were looking after an average of 2 children whose ages ranged from 1 to 12 years.

Data Collection

The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect the data from the participants. The interviews lasted approximately an hour, were conducted in English and in

locations chosen by the participants including their homes and public libraries. The interview guide covered questions on the motivations of the participants to become foster parents, the challenges that they encountered as foster parents and their recommendations on how to improve fostering in Ghana.

Data Analysis

The study used inductive thematic data analysis procedures to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). These included standard coding procedures, highlighting keywords, extracting emerging themes, reducing data and elaborating on any concepts that aided in answering the research questions. The transcribed data were manually coded and the emerging themes were extracted and explored regarding the existing literature for interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant after all the relevant information regarding the potential risks and benefits and the voluntary nature of the study was explained to them. The researchers also used measures that protected the confidentiality of the study participants by replacing their names with a pseudonym and anonymising any identifying information. The researchers received ethical approval from the University of Ghana before starting the study, and obtained permission from the agency to recruit the participants.

Findings

We present the findings of the study under sections titled “Motivation for fostering” and “Challenges of fostering” which consist of the themes established through the analysis of the interviews. The motivation for fostering describes the factors that influenced the participants to become foster parents for children who were orphaned or vulnerable. The challenges of fostering refer to the issues that the foster parents encountered in undertaking their role and which had an effect on the satisfaction derived from being a foster parent.

Motivation for Fostering

The findings indicate that the participants had different reasons for deciding to foster children, namely the love for children, religious and social obligations and satisfaction of personal goals.

Love for Children

Out of the 15 participants who took part in the study, 11 said that the love for children and concern for their well-being was the primary reason why they became foster parents. They mentioned that their willingness to take in children stemmed from the urge to

improve the lives of vulnerable children. Naomi, a 53-year-old single parent, who was fostering two children below the age of 10 years said:

It is good to foster vulnerable children, so they become important and good people in the future. I took care of a child who used to live on the streets. He has finished secondary school. Anytime I see him, I am happy. I want to continue fostering children in my community because of the love I have for them.

Another participant who stayed with his relative when his parents died stated:

I love children. Fostering requires love. It is difficult to care for children from different backgrounds and experiences, especially those who have had a hard life. I want to care for and protect them, just as my aunt did for me when my parents died in an accident. (David, 45 years)

The foster parents stressed that apart from loving children, they went into fostering children because they had the skills and ability to parent children. One parent said: “I love children and am able to care for them. I can care for the children better than some of their own parents.” The foster parents explained that their experiences of fostering a relative’s child who needed care or their work as professional caregivers gave them the passion and skills to care for foster children:

I want to help not because of the financial benefit that I will get from it. After all, how much will I get from it? I have been fostering the children of my relatives all of my life and I like doing it. I know how to care for children whose parents cannot. (Miriam, 34 years)

Religious and Social Responsibility

Nine participants mentioned that they became foster parents because they felt that they had a social responsibility and duty to give back to society. They believed that caring for vulnerable children was a way to serve their community and to help to reduce deviance and child delinquency in their community. Below are responses from a caregiver:

After working in the [name of foreign country] for some time, I thought that it was time to help my country. That was what made me volunteer to provide foster care to vulnerable children in the community. (Grace, 52 years)

Several of the participants believed that their Christian persuasion played an instrumental role in their considerations to become foster parents. According to these participants, they were fostering because it was a calling from God. One female participant said: “I think it [fostering] is a calling. If you don’t have that calling, you can never do the work that I am doing.” They also mentioned that, as Christians, they had a religious responsibility to help and take care of others in need, including

vulnerable children. According to the participants, taking care of foster children brought God's blessings upon them:

Christianity teaches us to love and give to those in need. As a Christian, it is my duty to care for children who have no parents or who do not have relatives to care for them.
(Martha, 48 years)

Satisfy Personal Goals

While some participants were motivated to foster because of their love for children as well as religious and social responsibilities, the motivation for others centred on meeting their own financial and emotional goals. Two foster parents indicated that they became involved in fostering because they had time on their hands that they could use to care for children and by so doing benefit from the stipends provided by the agency. An elderly participant who was living alone said:

Some of my relatives asked me, 'Grandma, are you sure you can undertake this venture at your age?' I said, I can ... I can use it as a way of keeping me fit and active and some money, so I would not need to ask them for any financial assistance. (Yvonne, 70 years)

Some participants also indicated that the reason they became foster parents was to use it as a stepping stone toward their aim of adoption. They felt that as foster parents, they would be given the first choice to adopt the child, when he/she became available for adoption. Judith who had been for several years without her own child, said, "I fostered the child from the agency, because I hope that I will get the first chance to adopt him if he becomes available." Also, Hilary indicated that she started fostering because it served as a pseudo form of adoption:

I came up with the idea to foster a child who we could possibly adopt, and my husband supported the idea. We are still hoping for a child of our own, but we also care for the foster child like he is ours. At least by fostering the child, we have a child in the house.
(Hilary, 32 years)

Challenges of being a Foster Parent

The participants cited diverse challenges of being foster parents, namely negative societal attitudes, financial challenges and fear of losing foster children.

Negative Societal Perceptions

Some participants said that the negative societal perceptions the public held about fostering was a serious challenge that they faced. They explained that people who knew they were fostering a child often felt they did it because they were barren or infertile:

People ask why I burden myself with caring for other people's children. They think that I cannot have a child of my own and that is why I am doing it. But I am not fostering because I cannot have children, but instead to care for children. (James, 47 years)

The participants mentioned that there were a countless number of times that people had referred to fostering non-related children as an activity undertaken by lazy people who were in it for financial gain:

People do not appreciate foster care. They think that if you are fostering someone's child then you are doing it for money. It is about time that people know that some of us become foster parents because we want to help children. (Gloria, 51 years)

Financial Challenges

Almost all the participants reported financial challenges which were associated with their role as foster parents. Only a few mentioned receiving some financial assistance from the agency. However, the support was usually delayed and was barely enough to meet the child's needs. Others, especially the female caregivers, were also unable to work full-time or do an extra job because of their fostering duties, which contributed to the financial challenges that they were experiencing. The absence of adequate support was affecting the foster parents' motivation to carry on with their role.

I enrolled [name of foster child] in school, provided her with a school uniform and met her other educational needs. But when her adoptive parents came for her, there was nothing. I asked the woman from the agency whether they will reimburse me for the expenses incurred by the child. She assured me that they would give me my money and requested that I submit the bill. They gave me only part of the money. These things make me think of stopping fostering. (David, 45 years)

Fear of Losing Children

The fear of losing a child after the placement ended was something that the participants constantly dreaded. According to them, although they received training on attachment issues and how to resolve potential problems after the child had left their home, they were unwilling to let the children go after investing their emotions, resources and time into looking after them:

It was difficult for me after the child left because I had built a bond with him. But that is the situation. Naturally, you feel like they are your children, so it's painful when they leave. I think it's one of the reasons why people do not want to become foster parents. (Grace, 52 years)

Almost all the participants felt unsupported by the agency because their social workers did not visit them regularly to supervise the placement or to provide the support that they needed. For instance, many of them voiced their displeasure about the absence of counselling services to help them cope with the emotional challenges, especially when the children were reunified with their parents or when they were placed with adoptive parents.

I have spoken to the agency staff several times, saying that they should inform us about a child's departure early so then we can adjust emotionally. But still, we get little prior notice before the child leaves. They do not do it or sit with us to talk about what we are going through when the child leaves. This makes the pain unbearable. (Wilhelmina, 51 years)

The participants felt that having an association through which to share experiences and to receive support and encouragement from other foster parents would help them to deal with any challenges:

I want to meet other foster parents who face similar challenges. Maybe when I hear their experiences, I will learn from them. But now it's like we are working individually. It is not very helpful. (Miriam, 34 years)

Unpleasant encounters with the biological parents of the children also affected some of the foster parents. Three foster parents mentioned that that they viewed the non-appreciation and support from the biological parents as a disruption to the fostering process. One female foster parent said:

A woman whisked the child out of my hands and informed me that she is the child's biological mother. My husband left the room because he could not stand the behaviour of the child's biological mother and I followed later. (Vivian, 58 years)

Discussion

The need for qualified foster parents in Ghana has become essential because the number of children living outside of parental care is growing. However, research on the experiences of Ghanaian foster parents is scant. Identifying the motivations related to fostering children and the challenges that foster parents encounter is essential for developing strategies to attract and keep foster parents in developing countries such as Ghana, especially within the context of ongoing childcare reform and deinstitutionalisation.

The main motivation for becoming a foster parent among the participants in this study was the desire to fulfil the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children based on altruistic reasons. This confirms the findings from earlier research in both developed (Brown et al. 2012; Diogo and Branco 2017, 4; López and Del Valle 2016, 126) and developing countries (Muchinako, Mpambela, and Muzingili 2018, 41; Ntshongwanga and Tanga 2018, 17). These child-centred motivations have been found to be intrinsically rewarding for the foster parents, since they provided a sense of fulfilment which sustains the foster parents in times of stress and leads to satisfaction with their role (Rhodes et al. 2006; Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied 2006, 1139).

Several participants fostered children out of a duty to their communities despite the cultural inhibitions to fostering non-related children. Several reasons could explain why this finding is made in this study. We speculate that awareness-raising campaigns by the fostering agency that tap into African cultural values such as ubuntu (doing good to others) and shared parenting practices could lead to the increased acceptance of the concept among the participants about the obligation towards non-related children. Also, all the participants in the study were Christians that may have contributed to their motivation to foster children, echoing the results of similar research (Howell-Moroney 2014, 733; Keys et al. 2017, 77) which suggest that religious people are less resistant to taking in children who are not related to them by blood because of their values and faith.

A few participants in the study volunteered as foster parents to meet their personal goals, including gaining financial rewards or a route to adoption. Such self-oriented motivations, however, can lead to worse outcomes in foster care (Rhodes et al. 2006). For example, children living with foster parents who expect financial rewards for the care they provide could experience marginalisation and abuse due to the non-fulfilment of the foster parents' expectations (Dhludhlu and Lombard 2017). These findings highlight that the screening of prospective foster parents should ensure that those volunteering have the right motivation. Social workers can undertake this rigorous screening by using appropriate protocols such as the one developed for the South African context by Carter and Van Breda (2016).

The findings revealed that the foster parents in the study face financial challenges because of the services that they provide for their foster children. These financial challenges were partly because, unlike what pertains in some developed countries such as the UK, the US, and Canada (Schofield et al. 2013), foster parents in Ghana are not reimbursed for the costs that they incur in meeting the children's needs or compensated for their services (Frimpong-Manso 2014, 406). This study found that the foster parents, mostly women working in the informal sector and earning minimal incomes, were finding it difficult to meet the needs of the foster children. As one participant suggests, failure to provide financial support to meet the costs they incur in taking care of the needs of the children could influence their decision to proceed with their role or not. Given these realities, the optimistic assumption that individuals who come forward as foster parents are good and will provide for unrelated children out of compassion without material and monetary support is not workable and could disincentivise low-income families willing to foster and desirous of fostering non-related children.

The financial challenges due to lost income and the inability to do other jobs raise the ongoing complex and controversial debate about whether foster parents should be paid for their services or if they should be provided on a volunteer basis (McHugh 2006). With the equation of foster parents to biological parents, the expectation is that altruism should motivate them to offer their services (Roman 2016, 179). Therefore, those who seek payment for their services are seen as having profiteering motives which should be discouraged (Hardesty 2018, 93). Such a stance devalues the care work mostly

undertaken by women, reinforcing patriarchal and discriminatory social norms that affect women's economic empowerment in Ghana. Paying foster parents would, on the other hand, professionalise fostering which would result in improved outcomes for the children (Wilson and Evetts 2006, 39).

The foster parents in the study developed relationships with the foster children and invested in them, which is good since it promotes good care outcomes such as placement stability (Crum 2010). These relationships, although helpful to the foster children, resulted in experiences of grief and loss on the part of the foster parents when the children's placements ended. Like the findings of other studies (Gribble 2016, 113; Hebert, Kulkin, and Mclean 2013, 253), the foster parents lack support to help them during this grieving process. Mullings (2010, 165) explains that child welfare agencies fail to support foster parents who are grieving over a foster child who left their home because there is an assumption that foster parents provide temporary care and therefore do not form strong enough attachments to feel a loss. The consequences of unresolved grief in foster parents could be emotional distancing, anger, depression and a loss of energy which could have an impact on new foster placements and other foster children in the home.

Recommendations

If the foster care system in Ghana is to attract and maintain the number of foster parents that the care reform envisions, there must be some financial help for foster parents. The Ministry of Gender, Social Protection and Children could link foster parents to the Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty social protection programme so that they can receive bimonthly cash transfers. Given Ghana's economic situation and low budget allocation for social welfare services, there is the possibility that growth in the number of foster families might increase the financial demands on the programme and make it unsustainable. Therefore, social workers in both state and private agencies should engage resource-constrained foster parents in economic strengthening programmes to establish a regular source of finances for them. Foster care agencies can expand the funding source needed for their operations through donor and sponsor outreach programmes to include other non-governmental agencies and private institutions.

Given that most Ghanaian foster parents are new at what they do, they need more support from social workers to deal with the challenges that come with their role, especially the emotional distress and trauma they experience after a child's placement ends. The social workers should help foster parents to start an association where they can interact, share experiences and give each other support through face-to-face meetings or through WhatsApp. The Ghanaian Foster Care regulations require that social workers provide foster parents with regular monitoring visits, but the evidence from this study indicates that this is not being done, probably because of their high caseloads. A solution to this can be that the DSW implements a telephone helpline that

the foster parents can call to get counselling and other support from the social workers. The DSW's promotional campaigns and media advertisements should include components that educate the public about the roles and responsibilities of foster parents to correct any misconceptions about foster parenting.

Limitations of the Study

The interpretation of the study findings should be approached within the context of a qualitative exploratory research. More specifically, caution should be made in generalising the findings of this study to all foster parents in Ghana, given our relatively small sample size. The study findings do not represent the experiences of all foster parents in Ghana such as those living in rural areas and those with other fostering agencies. Notwithstanding the limitations, the study highlights important information that is useful for developing effective strategies to improve the recruitment and retention of foster parents in Ghana and other similar non-western societies, while also dealing with their challenges.

Conclusion

Recent child welfare reform in Ghana aims to tackle the problem of children living without adequate parental care by providing alternative family-based solutions through formal foster care. In this vein, foster parents are important actors in the foster care system for the success of the programme. In terms of the development and implementation of awareness and recruitment campaigns, the findings have immense practical value for social work practice. Social workers with the information from this study can work towards preventing or reducing the challenges associated with foster parenting within the Ghanaian society.

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