

BABIES AND BOOKS: INFLUENCE OF STUDENT-MOTHERHOOD ON THE CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT MOTHERS IN KIRINYAGA UNIVERSITY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Female students who conceive during their studies at the university face challenges balancing between motherhood and studies. These challenges can affect their ability to successfully accomplish academic goals. This study investigated the challenges faced by student mothers and adopted the role conflict theory as the theoretical framework. The objectives of the study were to determine the academic challenges, establish financial challenges, to examining the child-care challenges, and identify coping mechanisms used by student mothers at Kirinyaga University, Kenya. Cross-sectional research design undertaken using snowballing sampling technical data collected using questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics. 69.2% of respondents' indicated their children had experienced health problems, 41% had missed class since having a child. 25.6% of the respondents disagreed with the perception that they are unable to concentrate on their studies. 53.9% were unable to access school facilities. These findings will be used by the Medical Department and the Guidance and Counseling Department to advise interventions for student mothers as they continue with their studies.

Keywords: Undergraduate students, university, motherhood, babies,

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood and higher education are both life-changing experiences, each demanding significant emotional, psychological, and time investment. For university students who become mothers during studies these two roles often intersect in complex and challenging ways. Thus, while higher education institutions are traditionally designed around the assumption of a young, unencumbered student body, the realities of student mothers present a sharp contrast to this presumption. These women navigate a dual identity, both as students striving for academic success and as mothers responsible for the nurturing and well-being of their children. This duality often results in a conflict of roles that can affect not only academic outcomes but also mental health and personal development ^[1,2].

In Kenya, where education system has progressively opened up to women through affirmative action and inclusive policies, an increasing number of young women are enrolling in tertiary education ^[3]. However, for those who become mothers during their university years, the journey to obtaining a degree becomes significantly more demanding. Many student mothers face institutional, social, and psychological barriers that are rarely addressed within the structure of the university system. This study investigated the challenges that student mothers at Kirinyaga University face, focusing on academic, financial, and childcare-related constraints, and sought to understand the coping mechanisms they adopt to manage these competing demands. The theoretical underpinning of the study is role conflict theory, which posits that simultaneous demands from incompatible roles can generate stress, reduce performance, and negatively impact overall well-being ^[4].

Background to the Problem

The increasing enrollment of women in higher education in Kenya reflects a broader global trend toward gender parity in education. Women's access to tertiary education has improved dramatically over the past two decades ^[5], thanks to global and national commitments to gender equality. In Kenya, initiatives such as the Free Primary Education Policy, subsidized secondary schooling, and university-level affirmative action have contributed to a surge in female university students ^[6]. However, access alone does not guarantee equal experience or success. Thus, among female students, those who become

mothers while still in school are a particularly vulnerable group, often encountering challenges that stem from their dual responsibilities and the social stigma surrounding motherhood in academic settings [7].

For student mothers, the university environment can become a site of psychological strain and logistical complexity. The rigorous demands of academic life; attending lectures, completing assignments, participating in group work are often incompatible with the unpredictable and round-the-clock nature of childcare. The stress is further amplified by financial burdens, as many student mothers must fund their education, support their children, and cover living expenses, often without consistent financial support from family or partners [8]. Unlike in more developed countries where on-campus childcare and parental leave policies are more common, Kenyan universities generally lack institutional support systems that cater to student parents. This structural absence of institutionalized support exacerbates the emotional toll and heightens the risk of poor performance or academic attrition among student mothers.

From a psychological perspective, the lived experiences of student mothers can be best understood through the lens of role conflict theory. Originally articulated by Kahn et al 1964^[4] the theory suggests that individuals who occupy multiple roles with incompatible expectations often experience conflict, stress, and reduced performance in one or more areas. In this case, student mothers are expected to excel academically while simultaneously performing the emotionally and physically demanding role of caregiving. The constant negotiation between these roles can lead to internal conflict, feelings of inadequacy, chronic stress, and in some cases, mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety [2]. However, despite these significant challenges, many student mothers demonstrate remarkable resilience, often developing personalized coping strategies such as time management, peer support, and reliance on extended family. Notably, research on the psychosocial experiences of student mothers in Kenyan universities remains sparse. Existing literature tends to focus on general gender-based inequalities in education or on adolescent pregnancy, with limited empirical studies delving into the intersection of motherhood and higher education^[9]. Moreover, little is known about how student mothers in rural-based institutions, such as Kirinyaga University, navigate these intersecting roles.

This study addresses this gap by providing a focused analysis of the academic, financial, and childcare challenges faced by student mothers in this context and explores the coping mechanisms that enable them to persist in their studies.

Literature Review

Female students who conceive during studies at University face various challenges balancing between the role of mother and being a student at the same time. Student motherhood has been associated with detrimental outcome among them being health, psychosocial and financial^[10]. According to Cabbaging 2017^[11] a female student conceiving while undertaking undergraduate studies is considered a full time job and contradicts the role of being a student since the two roles demand time and physical energy of the student. A major assumption underlying university culture is that university students' core duty is to attend classes and that they have no other responsibilities. As such, taking on motherhood and childcare alongside educational pursuit is frowned upon in institutions of higher learning.

Consequently, student mothers are likely to face negative feedback and emotional pressure as this is perceived as negligent and a lack of commitment towards attaining her academic success^[12].

Dankyi et al., (2019)^[13] investigated the life of student mothers at the University of Cape Coast Distance Education program in Ghana using a mixed method design and purposive and convenient sampling techniques. Results showed that student mothers go through academic struggles such as inability to attend face to face lectures on a regular basis since they were tired and due to illness of the child and sometimes, having to take the child to welfare clinic and a lack of proper lactation rooms for the breastfeeding mothers. As means of coping with the struggles, the respondents depended on paid house-helps, keeping children at day care centers, raising loans and relying on partners and friends for support. Elsewhere, Anibijuwon and Esimai, (2020)^[12] conducted a study on the challenges and coping strategies of student nursing mothers at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The study adopted snowballing technique and included 250 student nursing mothers. Majority of student mothers faced financial, childcare and academic challenges. Student nursing mothers faced a challenge of poor practice of exclusive breastfeeding and poor

breastfeeding practices. Lack of exclusive breastfeeding practice leads to devastating impact on the health and growth of the child especially cognitive, emotional and physical development. This was evident as the respondents' children had diarrhea and skin infections. Student nursing mother had to combine childcare with learning at night and often arrived late for lectures and this could be attributed to tiredness as a result of staying late in the night. These academic challenges have implications on the academic performance of the student mothers with poor concentration and inadequate preparation for examinations contributing to poor performance in examination.

Maluleka et al., (2023) ^[14] conducted an exploratory study which looked into perceptions and experiences of student mothers at the University of Western Cape, South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 25 full time undergraduate female students with at least one child. The study established that while having children in the university allowed for a closer mother-child bond, it also complicated the ability of the mother to fulfil their academic duties. On the other hand, student mothers who did not have their children with them were able to perform well academically but being separated from their children took a toll on them emotionally. The study noted that support from family members enhanced the ability of the student mothers to perform well academically as they would take care of the child while allowing the mother to engage in her role as a student. Munyua et al., (2022) ^[15], conducted a study on influence of student motherhood on academic performance in public universities in western Kenya. Using mixed research design and multistage sampling, it was observed that student mothers face challenges such as inability to balance their studies and motherhood responsibilities, childcare, maternal stress, anxiety, time management, and feeling exhausted. These challenges affect their ability to perform well academically.

Objectives

Objectives of this study was to determine the academic challenges faced by student mothers in Kirinyaga University, Kenya, to establish the financial challenges faced by these students, to examine the child-care challenges faced by these students and to identify the coping mechanisms that are used by student mothers in Kirinyaga University, Kenya

Method

The study used a descriptive study approach and employed quantitative method of data collection. The eligibility criteria for the study was being a female undergraduate student at Kirinyaga University and having a child or children.

Procedure

Participants in this study were selected using nonprobability sampling technique of snowballing Snowballing since the number of student mothers was unknown. The selected student mothers were asked to provide a referral of similar individuals who were eligible for the study.

Theoretical framework

The study was founded on role theory in the field of sociology. Role theory emerged through the contributions of American sociologist Talcott Parsons, who explored social systems, alongside German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, as well as Erving Goffman.¹⁹⁵⁹ [19]. Sociologists employ the term "role" to delineate a collection of anticipated behaviors and responsibilities associated with an individual's position in society in relation to others, Goffman, Erving. (1961) [16]. Additionally, roles serve as both a framework to direct actions and a roadmap for achieving objectives, outlining tasks and appropriate conduct within specific contexts. According to role theory, much of our daily social conduct mirrors individuals fulfilling their designated roles, akin to actors on a stage. Sociologists contend that role theory offers predictive insights into behavior; understanding the anticipated responsibilities associated with a given role (e.g., father, mother, athlete, educator)? allows for the forecast of significant portions of individuals' actions within those roles. Roles not only steer behavior but also shape our convictions, as per the theory's assertion that individuals adjust their attitudes to align with their roles. Furthermore, role theory suggests that behavioral change necessitates role modification.

Role conflict arises when an individual experiences discrepancy between the various roles they assume or enact in their daily life. This conflict may stem from conflicting duties, leading to a clash of interests, or when roles possess differing statuses. Additionally,

disagreements regarding the expectations associated with a particular role can also trigger role conflict, whether in personal or professional spheres ^[17]. In the life of a student mother, role conflict exists when two or more social roles overlap, which are the student and parental roles and are incompatible. Conflict occurs because the performance of one role interferes with performance of another. Role conflict can be time-based, strain-based, or behavior-based. This eventually could lead to various challenges to the student mother.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive design specifically, cross-sectional research design to collect data at a specific point in time. Snowball sampling was used to identify and recruit participants. This technique was deemed suitable for accessing hard-to-reach populations, such as student mothers, who may not have been readily identifiable through conventional sampling methods. Initial participants were identified by reaching out to a few undergraduate student mothers in Kirinyaga University through contacts in relevant departments and student organizations. Initial data collection involved administering surveys to these identified participants to gather information about their challenges and experiences as student mothers. Referrals were requested at the end of each survey, asking participants to refer other student mothers they knew who might be interested in participating in the study. Additional participants were recruited by contacting the referred student mothers and inviting them to participate in the study. This process of data collection and referral was repeated until data saturation was reached, i.e., until no new information or themes emerged from the data. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where recruitment stopped when no new information was obtained from additional participants. A diverse sample of 39 participants was aimed for to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. A structured questionnaire was developed, consisting of demographic questions and items related to the challenges faced by student mothers, such as academic stress, financial constraints, childcare responsibilities, social support, balancing academics and motherhood, coping mechanisms, and support systems available to respondents.

The questionnaire was administered to participants in-person, depending on their preference and accessibility. Confidentiality was ensured, and informed consent obtained.

A total of 39 questionnaires were administered. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (e.g., t-tests, ANOVA) to identify patterns and relationships among variables. Descriptive statistics was presented using frequency tables, pie charts, graphs, cross tabulation and correlations. Validity and reliability of the research instruments was ensured through pilot testing and validation procedures to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Results

92.3% (36) of respondents were between age 18-25. The respondents were asked to indicate their current year of study. 46.2% (18) of respondents were in fourth year, 33.3% (13) third year and 20.5% (8) in 2nd year. 66.7% (26) of the respondents were from the School of Business and Education, 17.9% (7) school of Engineering and Technology, 10.3% (4) School of Health Sciences, while 5.1% (2) were from the School of Pure and Applied Sciences. 19 (48.7%) of the respondents conceived when they were in second year, 9 (23.1%) when in third year, 5 (12.8%) when in first year, 3 (7.7%) in 4th year and 7.7% conceived prior to joining university. 37 (94.9%) of respondents had one child while 2 (5.1%) had two children.

27 (69.2%) of respondents' indicated their children had experienced health problems. Among the most common health related challenges were coughs at 29.6%, fever 27.8%, diarrhea 16.7%, skin infection 13.0%, poor weight 9.3%, and ear/eye infections 3.7%. Majority of the respondents coped with the health challenges by seeking help from health care facilities, while others worked on improving the hygiene and consulted the elderly, parents and guardians. 41% indicated they had missed class since having a child. 48.7% indicated they were able to combine child care and learning during the night., 41.0% indicated they were unable to combine childcare with learning during the day while 35.9% indicated that they were able to combine child care duties with learning during the day. A comparison of the ability to combine childcare during the day and night shows that it is easier to combine childcare and learning during the night than during the day. This could be explained by the fact that the students have lectures to attend during the day.

38.4% of the respondents agreed with the statement that they are able to concentrate on their studies while 25.6% disagreed with the perception that they were not able to concentrate on

their studies. 43.6% indicated they were able to understand topics which are taught in their absence, 23.1% indicated that they were unable to understand topics which were taught in their absence. 21(53.9%) indicated that they were unable to access school facilities, while 11(28.2%) indicated that they were able to access school facilities.

The student mothers employed coping mechanisms such as learning how to balance house chores with academics, accepting the circumstances that they have a child, seeking support from parents, taking the child to daycare, engaging in group discussions and consultations and relying on tutorials from online platforms. 35.9% of the respondents indicated that they were able to get to lecturers even as they have a baby while 43.2% disagreed with the perception that they were unable to get to lecture room on time since having a baby. 41.0% indicated they were able to concentrate on their lectures, 66.7% disagreed with the statement that they fall asleep during lectures while 20.5% indicated they agreed that they do fall asleep during lectures. 46.1% indicated they find themselves leaving the class as lecturers are continuing while 38.4% indicated they did not agree with the statement that they find themselves leaving class as the lecturers were continuing. 76.9% indicated that they do not carry their child to attend lectures while 20.6% do carry they children as they attend the lecturers. This could be attributed to the fact that there are available options where the children can be taken such as daycare centers. 59.5% of the respondents indicated that they do not occasionally carry their child to group discussions while 33.3% indicated they do carry their child occasionally to group discussions.

Coping mechanisms for challenges faced during lectures

The student mothers engaged in various activities to help them cope with the challenges they face such as missing classes, arriving late for classes, leaving lecturers early, looking for a baby sitter, developing uneven sleeping patterns, waking up early to prepare and creating extra time to study and concentrating during lecturers. 56.4% indicated they are able to prepare for their exams, 53.8% were able to find a place to keep their children during exams, 43.6% were able to concentrate when reading for their exams, 41.0% were able to feed their children when the examinations are continuing while 33.4% indicated they are not able to feed their children well during examinations. 90.5% indicated they have average performance while 9.5% indicated they had below average performance.

Coping with challenges faced during examinations.

When asked to respond to how they cope with examination challenges the respondents indicated they sleep late and woke up early. They have to create extra time to study and prepare. In addition, they find a baby sitter, daycare or parent to look after their child. The respondents further indicated they cope by adopting healthy attitudes such as being committed to attend the classes, adopting an attitude of self-acceptance and maximizing the time they have to study by fully concentrating during their free time. Some have to ensure they complete the exam in shorter duration so that they can go back to looking after their child.

Financial Challenges

66.7% of the respondents indicated they are not able to hire a baby sitter. 10.3% of those who are able to hire a baby sitter receive financial support from their partners, 5.1% hire the nanny on their own, 10.3% get support from the family to hire a baby sitter. 20.5% were able to afford a balanced diet while 33.3% were not able. 33.3% used part of their school fees to meet their obligations, 10.3% had taken academic leave due financial challenges while 41% were not able to cater for expenses. 65.7% coped with financial challenge by getting support from parents, 20% look for job and 14.3% prioritize their needs as way to cope with financial challenges. 61.5% indicated they were able to exclusively breastfeed their children for the first six months, 51.3% indicated they weaned their children early. 46.1% were able to access comfortable room for breastfeeding. 46.2% of the respondents indicated they experienced stigma from being a student mother. 46.1% indicated they have adequate time to bond and play with their children.

Coping with Childcare challenges

On ways of coping with childcare challenges, respondents indicated they cope by taking care of the child on their own, some received support from the guardians, friends, parents and relatives. A number of respondents provided meals for the child early to ease breastfeeding so that they could concentrate on their studies.

Mental Health Challenges

61.9% indicated they had not had a mental health challenge since becoming a student mother while only 38.1% indicated they had experienced a mental health challenge. Depression and stress were the most common mental health challenges faced by the student mothers. To cope with the mental health challenges, they visited healthcare facilities, received support from families, friends, parents and guardians. The respondents proposed several approaches towards addressing mental health challenges. These include offering daycare services within the institution, more guidance and counseling sessions with the student mothers, accepting themselves as student mothers, offering support financially, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Discussion

Student mothers experience immense mental pressure ranging from financial to stigma coping with learning to taking examination in stressful circumstances. In order to protect these students from sliding into mental depression, there is need for Universities to put in place child nursing rooms on campus to enable student mothers to come to University with their babies during learning hours.

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