Motherhood Experiences of Postgraduate Students in Kenya

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Abstract: This research study is an evaluation of motherhood experience in pursuit of postgraduate study in Kenya. The study has three objectives: 1) Learn more about the experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level; 2) Analyze impact of postgraduate study on women and 3) Evaluate how mothers who study resolve tension of combining motherhood and education. Using a qualitative approach, the study gathered data through open-ended interviewing questioning from 32 female participants who reported in their role as mothers of child (ren) eighteen years old or younger enrolled for postgraduate study at University of Nairobi. These study findings reveals that postgraduate student mothers experienced conflict between various commitments like childcare, domestic, work and academic duties. However, nearly all the women reported ways in which they resolved tension that affected their studies on their families by employing positive coping strategies. Participants' success appeared to be based on being organized and making sacrifices in other areas of their lives, time-management skills, family support and by sacrificing sleep and recreating time for their families. Women in this study experienced numerous benefits as a result of their study. Individual benefits included increased self-esteem and a sense of professional identity. Children also benefitted from their mother's postgraduate education because she provided a positive educational role model, developed skills to assist her children with their own education, and positioned her to improve the financial future of her family.

I.   INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Motherhood is an idealized role that marks a significant shift in the familial lives of women and their place in society (Heisler & Ellis, 2008). It is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors that changes with time and place (O'Really, 2004). Most cultures have specific rules that define the role of motherhood thereby institutionalizing mothers' roles (Walls, 2007). A good mother is typified as one who remains at home and makes the primary focus of her world and the development of her children (Gorman and Fritzsche, 2002). This belief persists regardless of the increasing number of women who work outside the home. Employed mothers are still responsible for the daily care and wellbeing of children and for running the household despite working outside the home (Lynch, 2008). The socially-constructed definitions of good student and good mother stratify the identity intersectionality of graduate student mothers in today's higher education system (Lynch, 2008). Unable to separate the two identities (i.e. mother and student), some graduate student mothers default to maternal invisibility (Lynch, 2008) in order to convince their peers (Jiron-King, 2005) and advisors (Bolick, 2010) that they are serious and committed scholars. A study by Lynch (2008) found high attrition rates related to this group of graduate students who faced difficulties combining the two identities of "mother" and "student". This helps to explain why postgraduate student mothers are more likely than their male classmates to drop out before finishing their degree and take longer to complete their dissertations. In Kenya, poverty issues are the greatest impediments to access to education by women especially in situations where choices have to be made on whether to take boys or girls to school. This is due to gender-insensitive policies and public attitudes that are permissive to discontinuation of girls from school and socio-cultural orientations that inculcate gender differences in performance.

1.2 Objectives

a) Learn more about the experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level;
b) Analyze impact of postgraduate study on women; and
c) Evaluate how mothers who study resolve tension of combining motherhood and education.

II.   2. METHODS

2.1 Introduction

The study focused on motherhood experience in pursuit of postgraduate study in Kenya. Owing to the nature of this study, the research design was mainly qualitative and face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher with 32 female students reported in their role as mothers of child (ren) eighteen

years old or younger enrolled for postgraduate study at University of Nairobi using an interview guide. In this study, qualitative research method focused on the way graduate student mothers interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (Artikson et al., 2001). The use of qualitative research enabled the researcher to gain a rich, in-depth understanding to why these mothers return for postgraduate studies and their experiences in combining the two roles of motherhood and education. The researcher chose this design because it uses open-ended questions in the interview, where the participants provide their own answers to the subject of investigation. This allowed the meanings and experiences of postgraduate student mothers to be captured allowing more freedom to give honest and specific answers. Here the researcher maintained direct contact with participants by asking and clarifying questions as needed (Creswell, 2009). By using qualitative research, the researcher gained greater insight into the behaviour of the postgraduate student mothers and the reasons that govern such behaviors. The study was carried out at the University of Nairobi which is a collegiate research university based in Nairobi and one of the largest institutions of higher learning in Kenya. The university has six colleges namely: Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences, Architecture and engineering, Biological Sciences, Education and External Studies, Health sciences, as well as college of humanities and Social Sciences (University of Nairobi, 2013). Purposive selection of this institution ensured that diverse views of students from all disciplines were captured. University of Nairobi is a public institution with diversified academic programmes and specializations in sciences, applied sciences, technology, humanities, social sciences and the arts. It records the largest number of student admissions for degree courses per annum. It comprises both regular and parallel students who attend classes day and evening. These students come from different walks of life with different interests and skill sets. Purposive selection of this institution ensured diversity as the researcher was able to capture diverse views represented by both groups regarding role strain.

2.2 Sampling Design of the Study

The study adopted both probability and non-probability sampling methods. More specifically, the study adopted purposive and snowball sampling techniques. University of Nairobi was selected purposively. In selecting 32 student mothers, snowball sampling method was adopted.

2.3 Type and Sources of Data

In this study, both primary and secondary sources of data were used to understand the benefits of postgraduate education on women. Primary data was gathered directly from individual postgraduate student mothers (Key respondents) from university of Nairobi by use of an interview guide respectively. Observational data involved noting and recording of events and behaviors of postgraduate student mothers by use of observation checklist. In this study, the researcher employed both participant and non-participant observation. Here observational methods have the advantage of directly evaluating learners' involvement and engagement in the learning environment and with the learning activities. Secondary data was obtained from university records, organizational records semi-structured and structured interviews, field notes, observation records and other personal, research-related documents.

2.4 Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative procedure of data analysis. The individual responses were analyzed, categorized and interpreted to draw conclusions. First, the researcher read through the transcripts and jotted down comments, notes, thoughts, and observations in the margins. Second, the researcher summarized the marginal notes by grouping data into various themes. Third, code labels were assigned to each section. Fourth, the preliminary codes were examined for overlap and redundancy. Fifth, the researcher eliminated redundant codes and collapsed similar codes, which were narrowed down to broader themes. The new list of code words was then used to examine whether these codes revealed common themes and recurring patterns. Last, the different data sets was continuously read and analyzed to refine the categories and to ensure that no text sections was overlooked. The findings were presented in narrative and prose for form.

III.   RESULTS

3.1 Social and Demographic Characteristics

The participants comprised of thirty two female postgraduate students studying at University of Nairobi. Twenty one of the participants were enrolled in a Masters program while eleven were PhD students. The women ranged in age from 25 to 58 years old, and the number of children each woman had ranged between one and four children. The participants' children were aged between 1-36 yrs. Table 3.1 provides further demographic information about the participants and their children.

Table 3.1 Showing summary of Demographic Information on Participants and their Children

S.N	Age	Degree	Degree Specialization	Marital Status	Religion	No. of Kids	Age of Children	College	Family Support	Additional Notes (Balancing Gender Roles
R1	32	Master	P.Planning	Married	Protestant	1	2	CEES	Support	Family duties greatly affect by study
R2	33	Master	Sociology	Married	Protestant	2	9 and 5	CHSS	Support	Time and work overload constraints
R3	47	Master	CD	Married	Protestant	2	18 and 10	CHSS	No Support	Disappointments from Department
R4	38	Master	CD	Married	Catholic	4	15,11,9, 11	CHSS	Support	Ability to balance conflicting roles
R5	34	Master	Finance	Married	Catholic	2	9 and 7	CHSS	Support	Coping well with studies
R6	29	PhD	Finance	Married	Protestant	1	4	CHSS	Support	Challenged by Financial constraints
R7	32	PhD	Anthropology	Married	Protestant	2	8 and 3	CHSS	Support	Exhaustion from conflicting tasks
R8	33	Master	H.R	Married	Protestant	1	2	CHSS	Support	Baby reduces my concentration
R9	44	Master	P. Planning	Single	Protestant	2	15 and 17	CEES	Support	Conflicting roles reduces study time
R10	35	Master	CD	Single	Protestant	1	3	CHSS	Support	Money is the problem
R11	44	PhD	Finance	Married	Catholic	2	15 and 13	CHSS	No Support	Insufficient reading time
R12	47	PhD	Nursing	Married	Protestant	4	23,20,17,9	CHS	Support	Supervisor has issues with my tribe
R13	37	Master	CD	Married	Protestant	4	13 and 10	CHSS	Support	Uncooperative/unfriendly lectures
R14	34	Master	Strategic Mnt	Married	Catholic	2	6 and 9	CEES	Support	Unsupportive employer
R15	32	Master	CD	Married	Protestant	1	1	CHSS	No Support	discouragement from my department
R16	43	PhD	Bus Admin	Married	Catholic	3	21, 17 , 13	CHSS	Support	Ability to balance Conflicting roles
R17	33	Master	Sociology	Married	Protestant	2	9 and 5	CHSS	No Support	Guilty of squeezed family time
R18	29	Master	P. Planning	Married	Protestant	2	5 and 3	CEES	Support	Coping well with roles
R19	32	Master	Sociology	Married	Protestant	1	7	CHSS	No Support	Ethnicity is a big Challenge
R20	58	Master	Disaster Mnt	Married	Protestant	4	36,32,31 18	CHSS	No Support	Money issues is my challenge
R21	28	Master	Journalism	Single	Catholic	1	3	CHSS	Support	Coping well with roles
R22	35	PhD	Journalism	Single	Catholic	1	12	CHSS	Support	I prioritize work school then family
R23	38	PhD	Education	Married	Protestant	3	9, 6 and 3	CEES	No Support	Great Support by employer
R24	46	PhD	P. Mnt	Married	Catholic	2	13 and 9	CEES	Support	Coping well with roles
R25	35	Master	Bus Admin	Married	Protestant	2	5 and 3	CHSS	No Support	Demands from family roles
R26	34	Master	Architecture	Married	Protestant	2	6 and 3	CAE	Support	Challenges from children
R27	40	Master	Sociology	Married	Protestant	4	16, 12, 8, 4	CHSS	Support	challenge in balancing roles
R28	44	Master	Law	Married	Catholic	2	13 and 8	CHSS	Support	Unable to balance Roles
R29	31	PhD	Bus Admin	Single	Protestant	2	4 and 1	CHSS	No Support	Difficulties combining roles
R30	25	PhD	P. Mnt	Single	Protestant	1	2	CEES	Support	Difficulties in paying fees
R31	28	Master	C. Change	Single	Catholic	1	2	CBPS	Support	Money issues is my challenge
R32	46	PhD	Finance	Married	Protestant	3	16, 12, 8	CHSS	No Support	Guilty of squeezed family time

Table 3.1 Showing Summary of Demographic Information on Participants and their Children

Relevant Themes to Experiences of Balancing Motherhood and Postgraduate Study

In this study, participants identified a number of issues relevant to the experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level.

Themes | **Sub-themes**

a) Experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level — Balancing roles
b) Impact of postgraduate study on women — impact on finances, children and partner
c) Resolving tension of combining motherhood & education: Positive coping strategies

3.2.1 Experiences of Mothers who Study at Postgraduate Level
™ **Difficulties in Balancing Roles**:
In this study, majority of women reported that the experienced tension in their efforts to balance their multiple roles of childcare, domestic chores and school work. The challenges identified were insufficient reading time and a feeling of guilt due to sacrificed family time, burnout-exhaustion due to conflicting roles of motherhood and study. However, mothers challenged these expectations to incorporate a provider role, which is incompatible with the traditional notion of a "good mother". These finding differs with those in Pare's (2009) that did not challenge the ideology of intensive mothering but were presented in terms of "good mother".

™ **Timetabling and Mode of Delivery:**
Women were able to organize their children around the school time table. Coordinating university timetable with school holiday was mentioned by mothers of school-aged children. University of Nairobi was mentioned for offering evening classes and part-time classes which was the major reason why women selected this institution.

3.2.2 Impact of Postgraduate Study on Women
™ **Financial Impact**
For all the other mothers, returning to study resulted in financial sacrifice and strain on the family budget

resulting to financial hardship. R10 complained of squeezed family budget by her studies that made her family suffer a big deal. This is consistent with the findings by Lynch, (2008), that revealed how lack of financial aid was the most common complaint made by graduate mothers.

™ Impact on Family Life and Children
Impact of studying was mainly negative for many women and was severe during semester for their children. This resulted to a sense of guilt due to sacrificed family time. R30 indicated that she felt guilty due to squeezed family time since she no longer spent quality time with her young children. R1 related that family duties were greatly affected by her studies while R17 indicated that she was haunted for sacrificing family time. This is consistent with Estes' (2011) findings that, while student parents believed that their children were a priority, this changed as they tried to fulfill their responsibilities as students.

™ Impact on Relationship with Partner
For some women their return to study at times put strain on their relationship, but it did not pose any long- term threat to the partnership. These findings concurs with those in a study by White, (2008), that reported that returning to education challenged womens' marriage, resulting in a near breakdown of the relationship.

3.2.3 Resolving Tension of Combining Motherhood and Education
Findings of this study show that although studying while raising children involves a lot of juggling; this led the researcher to consider the strategies used to do this successfully.

™ Organization
Women complained of difficulty in balancing multiple role commitments while simultaneously studying and raising children. They spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of their loads. The key to balancing study with their family was being extremely organized and arranging their lives to meet all of their competing commitments. They worked to a strict routine, time management and proper scheduling, to focus on their studies and be available to their families. This relate with a research by Estes' (2011) whereby student parents used positive coping strategies.

™ Sacrifice
Many women spoke of fatigue and burn out that accompanied trying to balance studying and motherhood, they sacrificed sleep, time with their family and friends, to focus on their studies. They often worked late into the night when their children were asleep, or early in the morning before they awoke. These research findings concur with Vyronides and Visilakis' (2008), where student mothers sacrificed sleep in order to study after their children had gone to bed while White's (2008), spoke of a double burden of juggling family roles with their studies.

™ Individual Factors:
Participants demonstrated strength of mind that sustained them throughout their challenges. Most mentioned ambition, discipline, determination, and persistence. To all, an inner sense of determination helped them through the difficulties of studying with children.

™ Support System:
Quality and quantity of this support varied, but in some cases it was this support that enabled women cope conflicting roles. Family provided the most reliable support followed by workplace where available while University failed to meet student needs. This may imply that women did not actively seek out university support because it was time consuming above their already full workloads. This finding concur with Springer et al, (2009), that discovered institutional issue in difficulties of combining motherhood with education, meaning, if universities offered mothers more support, the difficulties that they faced could be eliminated.

IV. DISCUSSION
This study evaluates motherhood experience in pursuit of postgraduate study in Kenya. Results demonstrated that over the course of their studies women employed positive coping strategies to deal with the challenges that arose in balancing conflicting roles of motherhood and education.

™ Financial Concerns
This study also reveals that financial concerns had a major impact on the women. They worried about buying the resources necessary for their studies, paying their bills as well as feeding their children. Women reconciled

their financial hardships with the belief that in the long term, their education would lead to an improved career prospects and an improved finances for their family. This relates to the findings by Lynch, (2008), that revealed that a lack of financial aid was the most common complaint made by these women.

™ **Educational Role Model**

Women believed that their children benefitted from the role-modeling they provided for them. For example, R4 said that she was her children's motivator by just seeing her study and her success of balancing studying with her other commitments. This is in line with findings by Suitor et al., (2008) that confirmed that women had reported being successful educational role model for their children.

™ **Valuable Parenting Skills**

Women indicated that by participation in higher education, they gained valuable parenting skills by giving them tools for their own children. For example, R18 explained that enrolling for postgraduate study made her much more patient to the learning process of her own children". This concurs with White's (2008) findings that mothers studying believed that their assisted them to better aid their own children's education especially those in teaching courses that enable to implement that with their children. Women studying in disciplines other than education applied the skills they learned to benefit their children.

™ **Improved Financial Future:**

This study revealed that having a mother in postgraduate study benefited children because they were able to look forward to an improved financial future. The mothers believed that obtaining a postgraduate education would give them better career prospects and therefore, improve their earning capacity. For example, R5 explained that her decision to study at postgraduate level was motivated potential earning power whereas her choice of undergraduate degree was motivated by a passion and desire for the subject area. This enabled her to putting herself in a position where she could properly care for her children.

V.   CONCLUSION

This study was an evaluation of motherhood experiences in pursuit of postgraduate study in Kenya. Findings from this study confirms that experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate education involved challenges, motivation, sacrifice, financial hardship and impacted every aspect of a woman's life. However, women were committed to their education and believed that the challenges of combining their studies and motherhood were balanced out by providing her with tangible and intangible rewards. Results demonstrated that women were able to cope with the demands of combining motherhood with education by resolving the tension by employing "positive coping" strategies. This is contrary to findings by Lynch's (2008 that indicated that student mothers employed "negative coping" strategies.

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