



www.chuk.ac.ke library@chuka.ac.ke

PSYCHOSOCIOECONOMIC CHALLENGES OF STUDENT MOTHERHOOD AND COPING MECHANISMS: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF TWO STUDENT MOTHERS IN KENYAN UNIVERSITIES

Oundo, M.B. and Murithi, G.G.

Chuka University, Students' Welfare Department, P. O. Box 109-60400, Chuka, Kenya

Email: monicahoundo@yahoo.com or gracegatune69@yahoo.com bmurithi@chuka.ac.ke boundo@chuka.ac.ke

Tel: 0715 318 344, 0733 240 012

Citation: Oundo, M.B. and Murithi, G.G. (2017). Psychosocioeconomic Challenges of Student Motherhood and Coping Mechanisms: A Multiple Case Study of Two Student Mothers in Kenyan Universities. In: Isutsa, D.K. and Githae, E.W. *Proceedings of the Third Chuka University International Research Conference held in Chuka University, Chuka, Kenya from 26th to 28th October, 2016. 229 to 235 pp.*

ABSTRACT

University Education requires resources in terms of finances, physical facilities, time, commitment, peer educators and mentorship to ensure academic excellence and professionalism. Besides pursuit of academic and career goals, undergraduate students tend to explore intimate relationships some of which result into student motherhood. However, balancing motherhood obligations and University Education demands can be a daunting task especially for undergraduate student mothers who have loaded academic programmes. This paper examined the psychosocioeconomic challenges of student motherhood and coping mechanisms. The research employed a multiple case study design. Detailed case information was obtained from two student mothers in Kenyan Universities. The participants were purposively identified from University Counselling Offices' client booking dairies. Self-administered interview and observation forms were used to collect data. The findings indicated that student mothers were ill prepared for demands of motherhood, experienced burnout from the burden of childcare, lacked adequate support from husbands and family members, felt socially neglected by friends, were left out during academic tours, spent much money on hospital bills and had to pay more rent for lack of relevant hostels. To cope with these challenges, student mothers skipped lectures owing to childcare responsibilities, preplanned activities to ensure mandatory tasks were carried out, relied on friends and well-wishers for childcare in order to attend tests and examinations, deferred studies, lived on tight budgets, sought financial support from "sponsors", solicited funds from friends and family members, redefined social boundaries and secured counselling services. Stakeholders disseminate pertinent information regarding student motherhood to all University students, hostel owners to provide services as well as facilities that are sensitive to student mothers and University Student Welfare Departments to initiate student mothers' social support groups.

Keywords: *Student motherhood, Resources, University Education*

INTRODUCTION

Affirmative action has facilitated increased enrollment of female students at institutions of higher learning in Kenya. Apart from academic and career pursuits, undergraduate students seek social

relationships that may lead to marriage and probable student motherhood. However, most undergraduate student mothers face an overwhelming task of balancing motherhood obligations and University Education academic demands (Forster and Offei-Ansah, 2012). Owing to emanating challenges, there is a possibility of undergraduate student mothers not maximizing academic as well as career potentials compared to male students and female colleagues without motherhood obligations. This is because student mothers tend to have less time to focus on academic work and to seek apprenticeship opportunities to grow their professional career prowess. Manieson and Mawusi (2015) assert that students' academic excellence can be acquired when the students are free from additional roles and only focus on academic work.

A study by Kumar and Bhukar (2013) comparing stress levels and coping strategies of college students suggests that female students experience more stress than male students. In this regard, student mothers may experience additional stress due to extended responsibilities. In addition, student mothers face financial constraints and blame this on childbearing (Manieson and Mawusi, 2015). A research study on financial behaviour and problems among University students alluded students' financial constraints on spending for pleasure, unmanageable debts and financial skills deficits (Jariah, Husniyah, Laily, and Britt, 2004). Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) cited child care role, interrupted sleep and inadequate time to be the most challenging aspects of student motherhood. Lynch (2008) found out that student mothers lacked affordable childcare, had access to limited financial support and tended to switch to part time study mode after child birth.

Forster and Offei-Ansah (2012) indicated that students with family obligations coped by working to raise money to meet basic needs and giving priority to family chores at the expense of academic achievement. Regarding financial challenges, University students needed financial knowledge and skills in areas such as budgeting, savings, investments, wise spending, credit management, insurance protection and how to increase personal income (Jariah et al., 2004). Manieson and Mawusi (2015) purport that married women in tertiary institutions engaged in group discussions to catch up with missed lectures and asked husbands or relatives to step in and take care of domestic chores in order for them to make time for academic work.

It is important to understand the challenges faced by undergraduate student mothers in Kenyan Universities and strategies employed in coping. This understanding is meant to form a foundation upon which stakeholders and well wishers can build intervention strategies to enhance learning environments for undergraduate student mothers towards academic excellence and timely completion of the graduate studies. To fill this gap, this study investigated the psychosocioeconomic challenges and coping mechanisms of student mothers in Kenyan universities.

Objectives of the Study

1. To determine psychosocioeconomic challenges of student motherhood.
2. To determine the coping mechanisms used by student mothers.

METHODOLOGY

This study adapted a multiple case study design in which several cases are studied at the same time as part of a single study (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2012). This allows for in depth study of pertinent issues that affect a particular group of individuals. Two cases of student mothers were purposively selected from University Counselling Offices' client booking dairies. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and consent to participate and cooperate in the study obtained. Self administered interview guides and observation check lists were used as data collection instruments. The participants' places of residence at the Universities were visited to enhance data collection via the observation forms. To minimize researcher's bias and maximize credibility during data collection and report writing, the data were collected using two formats that is, through interviews and observation check lists, for triangulation purposes. The two researchers also worked as a team and cross checked their observations for discrepancies. Objective report writing was enhanced through conducting several visits and interview sessions to ensure consistency over time regarding reported and observed data. Member checking which constitutes asking the participants to review the accuracy of the research report

was also done. In addition, the researchers were sensitive about personal attitudes and expectations about the study objectives and made effort to remain objective during data collection, interpretation and report writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings were organized according to the cases, case background information and the objectives of the study. Confidentiality was maintained by concealing the identifying information of the participants and the Universities involved. Case A and Case B were used in place of the participants' names. Prose narration intercepted with participants' quotations was adapted for report writing.

Case A

The following findings relate to the first undergraduate student mother who participated in the study.

Background Information

Case A was 23 years old and in her second year of study pursuing a Bachelors Degree of Education (Arts). The student mother lived with a four months old baby in a self contained bedsitter meant to accommodate two students. This residential arrangement required payment of rent equivalent to that paid by two students sharing the room. The father of the baby who was a fourth year student pursuing a Bachelor of Commerce Degree in a different University denied responsibility. Case A is the first born among three children raised by a single mother whose job involved running errands and other casual tasks in a learning institution.

Psychosocioeconomic Challenges

The respondent was asked to cite expectations that were disappointed with respect to motherhood. This question was designed to measure the participant's preparedness for the responsibility of caring for the baby while pursuing academic work. Case A revealed that she expected the father of the baby to accept responsibility and support in child rearing. *"When I told him about the pregnancy, he said that he cannot accept responsibility because he was in a stable relationship leading to marriage with another lady. Due to lack of support at the University, I had to defer my studies to give birth to my baby while at home."*

Probed on how she intended to raise the baby as a single parent, the participant thought that her mother would be persuaded to help in the child rearing role. *"My mother took care of my first born boy whom I delivered while in form three because she did not want my studies to be interrupted. This way I was able to complete my secondary school education and obtained university entry points in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations. So, based on how my mother had encouraged and supported me during the last trimester of my second pregnancy, I thought she would take care of my second baby as well. However, my mother was not in a position to stay with my baby girl at home because of her busy schedules and inability to afford baby care services. Now I just have to do with what is at my disposal."*

In response to an item on challenges of student motherhood, Case A mentioned non availability of child care services around the University and lack of support from friends and neighbours. *"There are no child care services in this area which makes it difficult for me to attend lectures since there is no one to leave the baby with. My friends do not visit like they did before I got the baby. I must call them to bring me notes and updates about CATS and assignments. Neighbours are also too busy to hold the baby for me to attend to tests and examinations."*

Inadequate financial endowment featured as a core challenge that lead to poor nutrition, unmanageable debts, disputes, begging and emotional distress. *"Lack of enough money for the baby's demands causes me to skip meals and do without other basics such as detergent and gas for cooking. Desperate situations force me to borrow without the intention of paying back which results into disputes and emotional distress. In some circumstances I beg from neighbours, friends and significant others."* These results are in line with the findings of Manieson and Mawusi (2015) who suggested that student mothers

blame financial constraints on childbearing. The results support findings by Jariah, Husniyah, Laily and Britt (2004) alluding students' financial constraints on unmanageable debts and financial skills deficits.

The participant also noted that the baby girl was difficult to sooth, a situation that demanded a lot of the much needed time and sleep. *“My baby cries most of the time particularly at night. She disturbs even neighbours who show concern over the frequency of the cries. Sometimes it is distressing when am not able to comfort her. Many times I feel sleepy and fatigued.”* Case A recounted a moment when she could not join friends on an academic trip because children were not allowed on the University bus for such occasions. She had to remain behind even though she would have loved to go. *“I felt disappointed when I was ready to join my colleagues for an academic trip but the facilitator informed me that babies were not allowed on such trips. I could not choose the trip over my baby. So I had to stay behind with the baby.”* This is in agreement with the findings of Forster and Offei-Ansah (2012) suggesting that student mothers gave priority to family chores at the expense of academic achievement.

The observation checklist revealed that Case A hardly had foodstuff in the house beside maize flour and she was always alone in the room with her baby girl who frequently cried during the researchers' visits. On the study table, there were notebooks that belonged to course mates meaning that Case A missed out on lectures and therefore had to write lecture notes from friends' notebooks. This finding is reflected by Manieson and Mawusi (2015) who suggested that student mothers discussed academic work with friends to catch up on missed lectures. There was also occasional medicine on the table reflecting a visit to the hospital or the chemist due to ill health. Generally, the room was clean and well organized. It was also noted that in one occasion, Case A asked for assistance in terms of food and fuel from a researcher. This was an indication that the participant borrowed or begged for help during hard times.

Coping Mechanisms

Case A was required to indicate how she coped with the challenges of student motherhood. She mentioned that helplessness caused her to seek counselling services from the Students' Welfare Department in the University. The counselling sessions helped her to balance between academic work and the motherhood roles. Some financial assistance was also granted from the kitty for needy students while the mother was contacted and persuaded to improve on the economic support towards her daughter. Since Case A felt rejected by friends, counselling helped her put the situation into the right perspective. *“I had to set new social boundaries and tone down my expectations from friends.”* This confirms what Manieson and Mawusi (2015) noted that student mothers set social boundaries that limit the time spent with friends in favour of childcare roles. Case A narrated of once leaving her baby in the room asleep in order to take a test since she lacked someone who could stay with the baby at that time. However, she ensured that the door was not locked in case of any eventuality.

Most of the time Case A stayed with the baby thus missing out on many lectures as a way of balancing academics and motherhood roles. To catch up with lost lecture hours, the participant regularly wrote lecture notes from friends and read them whenever she had an opportunity. When the friends came to pick up the notebooks, Case A could consult on complex concepts as well as schedules for tests and assignments. *“Being updated was important because this helped me to plan ahead and set priorities right.”* In addition, wishful thinking and faith in God helped the participant to deal with guilt, regrets and negative thoughts. *“When I feel guilt for not providing enough for my daughter and stretching my mother's budget, I just hope that one day life will improve. I imagine of a time when I will have a job and will not have to borrow or beg for survival. Faith in God's love and goodness helps me to overcome regrets and negative thoughts such as wishing I was never born or thinking of giving up my baby to a children's' home ”*

Case B

These findings represent information from the second undergraduate student mother study participant.

Background Information

Case B was 20 years old and in her first year of study taking Computer Science. The student mother lived with two and a half months old twins and a caretaker. The participant lived in a one bed roomed self contained house. She is an orphan who was brought up in a rural setup by grandparents. She was the only child to her parents who passed away while she was still in primary school.

Psychosocioeconomic Challenges

Case B was required to indicate any expectations she had about motherhood that were not met. She cited inadequate financial support from her husband and relatives. *“I expected that my husband who is a farmer would support me and the twins fully. Contrary, my husband and his relatives wanted me to stay at home and bring up the twins.”* The birth of twins also came as a surprise to the participant and posed a challenge of bringing up two babies and studying simultaneously. *“Twins are difficult to raise especially when one is least prepared for the task. For example, one of the twins cries a lot causing the other twin to wake up and begin crying as well particularly at night. We have spent many sleepless nights due to interruptions from the twins and sometimes we take turns to sleep.”* Similar to these findings, Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) cited child care role, interrupted sleep and inadequate time to be the most challenging aspects of student motherhood. The participant also expressed disappointment about a low turn up for a fundraise function she had organized to help solicit money towards her University fees and other expenses. This was attributed to her pregnancy as at that time. *“Students joining University in my home area do organize fundraising functions for University fees. Most people I had invited to my function failed to turn up because I was expectant. The few who came made meager contributions. However, the amount so raised helped me to settle down and commence my studies.”*

In relation to challenges of student motherhood, Case B cited limited time for academic work. *“I am not able to concentrate on my studies at home unless the twins are asleep. I worry a lot especially when the twins are sick, and in need of constant observation. This occurs at the expense of my academic work.”* These results agree with prior findings that most undergraduate student mothers face an overwhelming task of balancing motherhood obligations and University Education academic demands (Forster and Offei-Ansah, 2012). The participant mentioned frequent visits to the dispensary and hospital admissions for the twins as consuming a lot of her money. *“I have spent a lot of money in terms of hospital bills since the twins are sickly. On average, we visit the hospital once or twice a week.”* Feeding the twins was another challenge especially when the student mother could not produce enough milk for both babies. *“Sometimes am not able to exclusively breastfeed the twins. Supplementing breast milk with commercially made milk means spending money that is not readily available.”* There was also concern about overdependence on the grandparents for University fees and other expenses. *“My grandparents have struggled to bring me up and I wouldn’t want to stretch their budget further. Being able to fund my education and other expenses gives me a sense of independence and respect for my grandparents.”*

Information obtained by use of observation checklist confirmed data collected through the interviews. It was observed that Case B had enough food in the house and seemed to have friends paying her visits. She lived in a one bed roomed self contained house which espoused some level of privacy. The twins were generally calm but when one cried the other would join in making it difficult to quiet them. The student mother seemed preoccupied with the babies and giving instructions to the caretaker expressing more concern for the wellbeing of the twins. It was also observed that the house was clean and tidy.

Coping Mechanisms

Case B employed a caretaker to assist in the baby care obligations because it would have been overwhelming for her to care for the twins singlehandedly. *“The caretaker is of great help to me because am able to attend lectures, complete the assignments and take tests comfortably.”* The participant tried not to think about the situation at her husband’s home as a way of relieving distress. *“My husband never made it to the University and feared that furthering my education would cause an imbalance in our relationship. This was the reason why they wanted me to stay at home and take care of the twins like ‘good’ women did; a position that I opposed. It bothers me when I think about it mainly because of the connection between us through the twins. I hate to think that one day we shall live together again given*

the harsh treatment and contempt for my University education.” This was the reason for the participant seeking counselling services at the University offices. To finance her education and take care of the twins, Case B relied on a wealthy businessman who had shown concern during her fundraising function. *“A businessman from home promised to assist in paying my University fees but with time he started taking care of the upkeep as well. I feel it is better to remain in this relationship instead of giving up my studies or burdening my grandparents with financial demands. After all, other students are doing the same to survive.”* Conquering with this findings, Forster and Offei-Ansah (2012) purported that students with family obligations faced financial difficulties and coped by working to raise money to meet basic needs. Case B consults with grandparents through the mobile telephone whenever the twins are sick to mitigate the anxiety. *“When the twins are sick, I become afraid but talking to my grandparents helps me to cope because they tell me what to do.”*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:

1. Stakeholders need to disseminate pertinent information regarding student motherhood to all University students. This will help potential student mothers to prepare and adjust accordingly. The female students will also be empowered to make rational choices about motherhood.
2. Hostel owners may consider providing services as well as facilities that are sensitive to student mothers’ needs. Affordable spacious rooms with appropriate furniture to accommodate the student mother, the child and the child’s caretaker are necessary. Baby care services may also be availed for student mothers who cannot afford fulltime caretakers. This will allow such student mothers to attend lectures and sit for examinations without compromising the child’s safety.
3. The University Students’ Welfare Departments need to initiate and facilitate student mothers’ social support groups. These will serve as avenues to ventilate emotional distress and learn through sharing of experiences among the student mothers.
4. Insurance companies need to encourage student mothers to take medical policies to alleviate unexpected and hefty inpatient and outpatient medical expenses especially among children.

REFERENCES

- Alsop, R.; Gonzalez-Arnal, S. and Kilkey, M. (2008). The Widening Participation Agenda: The Marginal Place of Care. *Gender and Education*. 20(6): 623–637.
- Bhukar, J. P. and Kumar, S. (2013). Stress Level and Coping Strategies of College Students. *Journal of Physical Education and Sports Management*. 4(1): 5-11.
- Forster, P. and Offei-Ansah, C. (2012). Family Roles and Coping Strategies of Female Students in Ghanaian Public Universities. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. 2(5): 191-205
- Fraenkel, J. R.; Wallen, N. E. and Hyun, H. H. (2012). *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*. Eighth Edition. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Jariah, M.; Husniyah, A. R.; Laily, P. and Britt, S. (2004). Financial Behaviour and Problems Among University Students: Need for Financial Education. *Journal of Personal Finance*. 3(1): 81-96.
- Lynch, K. D. (2008). Gender Roles and the American Academe: A Case Study of Graduate Student Mothers’, *Gender and Education*. 20(6): 585-605.
- Manieson, P.A. and Mawusi, E. 2015. Issues and Challenges Confronting Married Women in Tertiary Institutions. *International Journal of Education, Learning and Development*. 3(9): 19-27
