

Career Development Challenges Faced by Undergraduate Student Mothers in Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

This study examined challenges faced by undergraduate student mothers in public universities in Kenya, a case study of three public universities in Uasin Gishu County. The population of this group of students is gradually rising, balancing motherhood and studies is a challenge that all of them must confront. The purpose of this study was to find out how they can be assisted to balance studies and motherhood. This investigation adopted a mixed approach methodology with a case study design. Purposive sampling was used to select forty nine (49) participants, consisting of forty three (43) student mothers, three (3) leaders of Student Governing Councils and three (3) administrators. Tools for data collection included questionnaire, interviews for administrators and students leaders. Focused Group Discussions (FGD) were used to gather in- depth information from students' participants. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses. The major findings indicated that public universities do not have exclusive administrative, financial, social and physical structures in place to address the plight of undergraduate student mothers. They face many challenges including, stigma, misunderstandings with spouses/families/partners, financial constraints, accommodation problems and inability to balance motherhood and studies. It was recommended that public universities should provide financial, psychological and social support to these students to help them balance motherhood and studies. Aggressive programs should be initiated by public universities to create awareness of the challenges of motherhood and acceptance of oneself to guard against low self-esteem.

Career development, Challenges, Undergraduate Student Mother, Public University

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Introduction

University education is the apex of academic pursuit and backbone from which all new knowledge radiates by means of research (GoK, 1999). The training and the skills acquired play a major determinant role in national development and growth through

production of high level human resource (GoK, 2005; World Bank, 2008). According to the Basic Education Bill (2013), the policy on education and training is to develop a critical mass of human capital with necessary competencies and skills. This manpower is critical in realization of achievement of the goals and objectives of education as outlined in the Kenyan Constitution of 2010 and Vision 2030. An individual's academic performance at university level of education is very critical as an entry starting point to the job market. It forms the basic self-marketing tool in job application, selection and final placement. Motherhood in the process of learning presents new roles and challenges that require delicate balancing skills by students to achieve their academic potential. There is need to help students acquire these skills and manage studies and motherhood in order to realize their academic potential.

Career development

Effective career development is central to career success of adults in the modern challenging world of work. Career development is defined as a long journey that begins early in somebody's life and ends around late adulthood (Hansen, 1976; Zunker, 2006; Super, 2006); it is both a continuous and discontinuous process that requires clients to learn, adapt, make changes and develop all life roles. This indicates that career development is the total constellation of economic, sociological, psychological, educational, physical and change factors that combine to shape one's career (Zunker, 2006). People come to understand themselves, in terms of whether they are suitable for specific jobs and their ability to manage related demands (Super, 2006). Motherhood

clearly puts overwhelming pressure on students' time, finances, social life and education. These challenges during the implementation stage of career development have to be addressed to avoid negative impact on students' training (Hansen, 1976).

Performance of people whose career development has been interfered with at any stage can remain lukewarm due to lack of confidence in their own ability to perform specific tasks (Carnegie, 1998). Lack of confidence may be a function of missing out on critical areas during training or cheating in examinations. Negative values like mistrust, hatred, low self-esteem, revenge, and disappointment can easily spill over to one's work environment resulting in undesirable performance. Importance of social skills in work places was emphasized by Coleman (1998) who argued that social skills are the new yardstick on the dynamic job market in determining who will be hired, declared redundant, retained or promoted.

In agreement with Coleman, (1998), Carnegie stated that our attitude towards our work is a crucial determinant of whether our days are filled with excitement and sense of fulfillment that comes from top performance or frustration, boredom and fatigue (Carnegie, 1998; Trump & Zanker, 2008). Challenges faced by undergraduate student mothers, can compromise the quality of training they get and therefore, quality of work they provide at work stations later in life. Interventions measures, if put in place by public universities and families are likely to make a difference in the quality of trained personnel released to the job market yearly.

Education and motherhood

Pursuing university education as an undergraduate mother is involving and challenging. These challenges include time management, financial, getting and maintaining a maid, commuting for those who are non-residents, rent payment, providing basic needs for the child and stigma (Trotzky-Sirr, 1999). Those who are married have to deal with mistrust from husbands who may not understand the demands of courses of study. Extended hours for group discussions, field study or make-up lessons were reported to be sensitive issues for those who are married and therefore, cause for misunderstandings (Respondent, 2015).

As a result of these challenges, some students are tempted and actually do cheat in examinations. For this group of students, such situation may not have risen if they were not mothers facing daily challenges of raising babies (Respondent, 2015). Sometimes, the welfare of a sick child is more important for a mother than attending lessons or adequately preparing for examinations (Students' Welfare Team, 2013). Attaining 80%, class attendance is mandatory in public universities as a basis for sitting examinations (DOS, 2013) , chances of these mothers missing to get the required class attendance percentage is higher than any other group of students. The duration of some of the units can last for three weeks and are practical in nature, missing even one lesson disadvantage students in final year examinations. Studies indicate that people who

have unfair advantage over others in training by way of cheating in examinations, experience internal inadequacy at work, although they appear excellent externally (Clarkson, 2005). For those who provide health services, these effects are worse because they handle human life, and any mistake can be fatal, causing death or permanent disabilities. As a result, this group of workers does not get satisfaction from their work but relief and constant worry for the next task (Zichy & Bidou, 2007).

Other challenges of motherhood include: pressure to pay rent, welfare of babies in their absence, misunderstandings with spouses/partners, and medical care. Provision of food is uphill tasks for many of those with weak financial background (Respondent, 2015). Studies on Time, an empirical analysis of Law students time Management Deficiencies (Bartholew, 2013) indicated that students are spending less on quality hours on studies than earlier generations. Given this scenario, becoming a mother seems to make a bad situation worse; therefore, chances of failing and being discontinued are higher and therefore, examinations become a life and death affair because students feel they must pass at whatever cost.

In public universities, there are inadequate social support services, counseling units are overstretched with a few officers charged with the responsibilities of handling general needs of all students. There are no specific programs or arrangements to take care of undergraduate student mothers or their children (Trotzky-Sirr, 1999). Such arrangements can include health care for babies, accommodation facilities and rest and breast feeding rooms for mothers (Student Support Team, 2013). Families may not offer

the support required by the young mothers due to poverty and rejection. Boyfriends who refuse to accept fatherhood responsibilities add to the many challenges experienced by these mothers.

In some countries outside Africa (Trotzky-Sirr, 1999; Student Support Team, 2013; Students' Union Welfare Team, 2013), comprehensive measures have been implemented to help undergraduate mothers realize their career dreams, by managing motherhood and remaining focused on their studies. In United States of America, France, New Zealand and Britain, this group of students are provided with psychological, financial, health, educational facilities for kindergarten babies and accommodation facilities. They are empowered to stand up for their rights, which is important so that they can maintain their self-esteem. Such students even if they fail in examinations, they easily turn such failures into opportunities for working harder (Kiyosaki, 2011).

Financial assistance is available from Financial Support Office and the Students Unions have Childcare Funds (Student Support Team, 2013). Schools (faculties) also operate a day nursery from age of three months to school age, and day nursery schools are available, school common rooms are available for use as rest rooms to breast feed babies, express milk and store (Students' Union Welfare Team, 2013). Student Parent Units are available to advice student mothers on how to balance competing commitments in order to study successfully and therefore, focus on their career development (Student Support Team, 2013). Separate accommodation facilities are

available for their use. These are strong support systems to ensure that all students who enter university do not shoulder responsibilities beyond their abilities that can interfere with studies.

Willing male students are also guided on how to assist in taking care of their babies in male only counseling units. But in Kenya the situation is different because male students do not have such programmes. Counseling is general for all students; this may discourage those willing to learn how to get involved in childcare. For those who consider termination of the pregnancy, services are also available at places like Adviser to Women Students, Adviser to Male Students, Students' Union Advice and Support Service, Well Being Office, and Counseling Unit among others (Trotzky-Sirr, 1999). In Kenyan public universities, there are no specific structures to assist pregnant or student mothers and willing male partners. Students Governing Councils have a welfare unit with scarce funds which are overstretched. These funds may be available for other student needs but not baby welfare.

Motivation for the study

Dean of students offices interact with undergraduate student mothers as they defer or repeat year of study, clear out of a university after being discontinued, fill maternity leave, attend examination irregularities disciplinary procedures or revise courses of study. While most of these issues are common in public universities, motherhood makes students more vulnerable. Balancing motherhood and course

demands is an uphill task to many of them; they easily lose focus on their education. It is possible for them to remain focused on their studies if they are assisted by families and universities.

The purpose of the study was to examine ways in which public universities can assist undergraduate student mothers to manage their studies and motherhood in order to achieve their full academic potential and career development. This study aimed at finding out the measures that public universities can put in place to assist undergraduate students mothers realize their academic potential and develop their career.

Research Methodology

The study employed mixed methodology approach with a case study design to examine challenges faced by undergraduate student mothers. Purposive sampling was used to select forty nine respondents, made up of 43 undergraduate student mothers, three student leaders and three administrators from three institutions which were too few to be sampled. Undergraduate student mothers were requested through Students Affairs departments and class representatives to participate in the study. All 43 student mothers who responded positively were included in the study, representing 19 Schools across various years of study. Data were collected through questionnaire, focused group discussions, interviews and document analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses. Career development theory by Super (2006) was adopted for the study. This theory is made up of five stages: crystallization, specification,

implementation, stabilization and consolidation. This study focuses on the implementation stage which is characterized by training and release of graduates to the job market.

Findings

Background information: The findings indicated that 55% of the respondents attended provincial schools while 30% went to district schools. A total of 64% agreed that they are sponsored by the Government, and 60% are on HELB loans. The response on marital status indicated that 40% were single, 50% married and 10% non-response. 57% indicated that they became mothers after joining university and majority during their second or third year of study

Reasons for motherhood: The causes of motherhood for those who became mother (15%) before joining university were listed as: ignorance, peer pressure, and new found freedom exercised during 'sleep over' (sleeping at a friend's house) and parties (bash) celebrating end of secondary education. Majority of the respondents who became mothers during their course of studies mentioned permissive environment, pressure from boyfriend and personal desire to have a child without considering pressure of motherhood. Asked why they do not want to engage in safe sex if they cannot abstain, 40 % of the respondents said they risked losing their boyfriends and they were not ready to do that. One of the respondents captured the concerns of others by saying that:

The only safe method I can use are condoms, but my boyfriend does not like them, he claims that condoms are a sign of mistrust and I risked losing him to the other girls who would be more than willing to do what he wants (Respondent, 2013).

Other reasons given for engaging in unprotected sex leading to motherhood included: use of alcohol, drugs, loss of self-control, and peer pressure. All these reasons appear unreasonable for students at this level, but they actually contribute to motherhood. A minority of the respondents said that they became mothers out of personal choice to do so but underestimated the responsibilities of motherhood alongside studies. While those who are married mentioned pressure of husbands/partners to have a child, with little or no consideration towards challenges they experience.

Asked if they supported one another, 25% of the respondents said that they have formed support groups to share their experiences and encourage one another. They baby sit for one another if they reside in the same locality and are in different programmes. The study showed that a few student fathers have shown interest by helping in babysitting, taking babies to clinics and hospitals. This is a step towards the right direction, as students take responsibility of their behavior and also reduces stigma associated with parenthood. Support groups can also be used by counseling offices to reach out to other students create awareness of difficulties of balancing motherhood and studies. This may be an important venue for students to help them understand challenges of motherhood.

Financial support from families and accommodation: Fifty three percent (53%) of the respondents were non-residents and they reported that their rent was paid by significant others as follows: parents (30%), self (35%) and spouse (35%). For those in marriage and stable relationships, rent was not a problem but majority of those who paid rent for themselves confirmed that it was a challenge.

My parents were very annoyed when I gave birth; they refused to pay rent for me, when I suggested that I leave the infant under their care, they also refused. I was told to sit at home for one academic year so that I can learn never to mix education and pleasure. The father of my child, who was in a different university failed examinations due to harassment from my family and was discontinued ... My father demanded that he marries me; but his family refused to help in clearing my hospital bill after delivery (respondent, 2013).

All the three administrators indicated that there was no financial support or separate accommodation facilities for undergraduate student mothers. It was upon each individual student to make private arrangements to manage studies and motherhood. Response from student leaders from the three institution confirmed that there is a welfare fund in their governing councils where all students in- need can borrow funds. However, the demand was higher than the supply.

Academic and career development: Asked how motherhood affected their studies, 37% indicated that they sat supplementary exams and 23% deferred studies, while others repeated or were discontinued. All participants during Focused Group

Discussions agreed that they would never have deferred or repeated a year of study if they did not have to worry about the welfare of their children. Respondents (28%) who received financial and psychological support from families reported little or no negative impact on their studies. Majority of those who were married (37%) reported negative impact of motherhood on their studies arising from misunderstanding between spouses. Leaving children under the care of a maid, especially infants emerged as a major source of constant worry for majority of the respondents, making it difficult to concentrate on their studies and therefore, affecting quality of grades. One of them who had supplementary examinations reported that:

I have three children, two boys and one girl who is the youngest. My husband level of education is Form Four and he felt insecure when I joined university. I left my children with my mother as he refused to take care of them in my absence. He does not provide for them regularly although he is working and I borrow money for their medication most of the time. He had formed a habit of forcibly taking the children from my mother during examinations period to distract me from focusing on my studies. He would lock them in the house whenever he went for duty. This happened twice, which disturbed me so much that I didn't do well in end of year examinations. When I reported him to the police, he was ordered to take them back to my mother. He no longer disturbs me and am now focused on my education (respondent, 2015)

Asked how motherhood affected their relationship with classmates and lecturers, 29% confirmed that they have been mocked by lecturers and classmates who accused them of being dumb and getting pregnant. This resulted into low self-esteem and lack of proper focus on studies. Majority of the respondents (73%) agreed that the maternity leave of 21 running days is inadequate for full recovery and this was even worse for those who deliver through cesarean section. They suggested that maternity leave of thirty days minus weekends and holidays would be fairer.

Conclusions

1. **Reasons for motherhood:** Findings indicated that reasons for motherhood were peer pressure, freedom at universities devoid of usual family and secondary school restrictions. A few families are not even aware that their children are mothers. As a result many engaged in alcohol drinking, attending parties (bash) to release academic pressure ending in unwanted pregnancies. Majority of the participants underestimated overwhelming challenges of motherhood.
2. **Academic and Career Development:** Balancing motherhood and studies remained a major challenge to all students whether married or unmarried. This resulted into some students deferring studies, repeating, revising course of study or being discontinued. Welfare of babies in absence of their mothers appeared to a constant cause of worry, which interfered with concentration on studies and therefore, career development.

3. **Financial Support and Accommodation:** Finances for basic needs, accommodation and general welfare came from families, spouses or individual students. It was a challenge for families with weak financial basis and also a cause of misunderstanding for students and parents, spouses or partners. Universities do not play any role in assisting student mothers with funds. It was upon individual students to get alternative accommodation facilities as universities do not have separate hostels for them. Students with irregular financial support worried frequently on how to survive, and rental areas were located in poor environments not conducive for studies.

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