

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES CONFRONTING MARRIED WOMEN IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this study was to identify the domestic and academic challenges that confront married women in tertiary institutions. A qualitative approach was adopted for this study. The purposive sampling technique was used to select 30 respondents from a group of married women in the University. It was observed that difficulty in caring for their family members at home due to school activities was their major domestic challenge and loaded academic work that had to be accomplished within a short time frame was their major academic challenge. The causes of these challenges were identified as financial constraints and the performance of their marital responsibilities at home as married women. The respondents expressed that these challenges led to low concentration during lectures and low academic performance. They suggested that minimizing the pressure from their households and reducing the number of programs that had to be covered at the University can help them cope with the situation.*

KEYWORDS: Marriage, Women, Tertiary Institution, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Education is believed to provide knowledge and resources that hold potentials for economic empowerment for better livelihood and social development. Education is one of the most far reaching requirements for development, alleviating poverty, improving health outcomes and quality of life, reducing gender and social disparities, and enhancing economic productivity. Education contributes to economic growth and productivity as well as sustains livelihood for national development (Rogers, 1997).

The mounting interest of women in further education in the form of continuity in tertiary education must be sustained and nurtured. This will enable them to maximize the benefits of societal participation.

However, mass involvement of women in continuing higher education is a recent development. Before the twentieth century, just a handful of females were granted access to education. The number of illiterate-women were subsequently increasing since they had no access to education or were sent to school. This was because, at that time, women were victims of all sorts of cultural and social constraints. They were subjected to all forms of discrimination and marginalization by the existing cultural and social practice, especially in traditional African culture. They were denied access to education at the expense of their most fortunate brothers who were most preferred (Becker, 2000).

During the forty-first session of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijin, the United Nations Commission on the status of women, recommended further action to be taken to improve women's access to education, including the mainstreaming of gender perspective in all policies and programmes in the educational sector.

Over the past twenty (20) years in Ghana, there has been significant progress with regards to women's access to tertiary education. This has expanded significantly and women's enrolment including the married and unmarried has increased considerably.

Challenges faced by married women and mothers and its Effect on school performance

Lee & Myers (2005) postulated that being a student-mother is a delicate juggling act. According to the authors it takes time, patience and boundless energy. In addition to filling the role prescribed to them as students, they also have to schedule their lives around a growing child's need. According to the authors, a married woman student and a mother, may have challenges pertaining to the home. The inter-role conflict is due to incompatible expectations where demand on one role makes performance of the other more conflicting.

Asare (1997) stressed that home pressure is a huge problem. A married woman student who has children often gets up very early in the morning trying to get everything done at home before going to lectures becomes tired and not very alert at classes. Quartey (2003) also asserts that as a result of the strains on their time and energy, married women experience fatigue, lack of time for revision and rest and feelings of guilt over not fulfilling their traditional role expectations at home.

Lee and Myers (2005) state that family problems create imbalance for married women students who are day-students or non-residential student whose husbands move out of the family's home and come back late in the night. The husbands always threaten to divorce his wife as a result of poor marital performance and overweening behaviour on the part of the student woman. This may result in depression, making her emotional state so fragile. Such a woman who is a student is distracted and has divided attention at home and at academic work.

Lee & Myers (2005) noticed that some mothers on campus are single and others are married; some have one child to look after and others large, blended families. Whatever their situation and issues are, each woman has a unique story to tell.

Student-mothers face a lot of challenges when pursuing University education. Chigona and Chetty (2007) in their study identified lack of time to study and do assignments as one of the major challenges of the student-mother. According to them most of the student-mothers do not have time to study because when they return from school, their relatives who voluntarily serve as baby-sitters want to be free of child-care chores. In addition to that the babies also want their mother's attention. This suggests that mothers who do not have full day child-care services face the challenges in trying to balance childcare with academic work. Chigona and Chetty (2007) cited Kaufman (2001) in a similar study in South Africa where they found that mothers' adjustment to school life after giving birth during the program is not easy. According to their finding such mothers become divided between childcare and studies.

A similar sentiment was echoed in the United States where it was argued that managing to care for a child and devoting adequate time to academic work has not been an easy task for mothers (Arlington Public School, 2004). Hallman and Grant (2004) identified missing class or lectures as one major challenge facing mothers in school. According to them, when the child falls sick the mother gives attention to the care of the child at the expense of their academic work. This suggests that even if a mother ignores a sick child because of her academic work it is likely she cannot concentrate. They further stated that, teenage mothers in their case face the

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challenge of acceptance by teachers and colleagues. They are stigmatized as bad girls who did not plan their lives hence became mothers. This stigma may go a long way to affect their performance at school.

Also, educators do not understand mothers who are in school. It is suggested that the institutions need knowledge regarding the problem of mothers. Moreau and Kerner (2012) noticed little or lack of institutional support on campus for mothers. Lectures are re-scheduled in the evening or into the night at the time day-care or other childcare service providers have closed. This made childcare a problem. According to Moreau & Kerner (2012), academic programmes disregard the need of women during pregnancy, childbirth, maternity leave, etc. Ignoring this creates an atmosphere of condemnation hence student-mothers feel their issue has not been given attention. This is consistent with Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid (2009) who noted:

“Mothering and fathering is not normative on campus. Student mothers experience awkward pauses rendered by pregnant bodies on campus, struggle to navigate strollers in classrooms, and search to find clean and discreet places to feed their babies. Although sometimes subtle, there are constant reminders in the social and physical environment of the university that graduate student parents and their children do not truly belong” (Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid, 2009, pp. 439)

Again, supervisors in higher level of education are mostly men who do not understand mothers. Some of these lecturers are supervisors who will not supervise a woman who has children. On the contrary, other professors understand the challenges of student-mothers.

Married women suffer from both conflicting demands between family and academic work. Conflicts between the demands of academic work and motherhood, for example childbearing and nursing time, pregnancy and academic work; which means the progress of academic work is stopped or slowed down. While fathers or mothers without nursing babies could spend nights in the library or laboratory researching, nursing mothers without reliable childcare facilities cannot do that.

Childcare is expensive therefore, parents resort to family members catering for their children whiles in school. This is similar to Chigona & Chetty (2007) who also affirmed that financial problems have made mothers to ignore quality childcare services since they cannot hire or pay for it.

The findings from Chigona & Chetty (2007) reveal that children of student-mothers are robbed of motherly love or care which has its future implications. Though mothers knew the effects, they are forced by academic work to overlook it. Although some of the researchers claimed that academic and family life of mothers is colliding, others revealed that motherhood is not always a disadvantage in school. According to Chigona & Chetty (2007), some mothers are able to blend their course work with their family life without any lapses.

Additionally, married women returning to school after many years of absence from school may not have realistic ideas about how student life will be like. Some of them are not certain about how to cope and relate to lecturers and younger students in class. They may also have problem with developing appropriate study skills. This makes them feel uncomfortable on campus.

Some students may have issues with their roommates thus “possible roommate conflicts.” In addition, when student-mothers are mixed with other students who are younger or are not

mothers, it creates an atmosphere of inconvenience since some of them may be noisy. This creates an atmosphere of disturbances and limited privacy. Research shows that the experiences, anxiety and emotional stress that adult-students go through, sometimes affect their academic performances. For instance, the findings of Olu and Brown (1979) stated that adult students can perform excellently if they are free from other roles and concentrate only on their academic work

There is no such thing as a typical student and there is no single reason for returning to study. Redundancy, the need for skills, the desire to study a particular subject, an interest in trade union activities, a desire to keep up with the children, to change career, to make up for lost opportunities – anyone of these reasons may prompt a mature person to become a student.

Marriage ensures security for the couple and their children in Ghanaian society. Marriage therefore bestows high social status on the couples especially the women. A study conducted by Becker in 2000 on Married Women Pursuing University Education in Africa revealed that 35% being between 35 – 40 years were in the University to upgrade themselves in order to be promoted to be abreast with time, to raise their social status or prestige and upgrade themselves in order to get a good job. This confirms the findings of Becker (1995) that some married women go for further studies for credentials, promotion and good job.

Reasons why some married women did not enter the University earlier to pursue further studies was due to finances, childcare or because they did not get somebody to take care of their kids for them and for that matter their husbands did not encourage them to further their studies at the University.

Submissions from the various literatures mentioned indicate various problems that student-mothers face. It is likely that student-mothers are likely to have more challenges as compared to adult students. Thus, they have to face the challenges of adult learners and at the same time student-mothers.

In view of this, the purpose of this study will be to identify the challenges and issues that married women face as students of University of Education, Winneba and suggest ways of mitigating it for better academic performance. The outcome of this study will help in the organization and formulation of future plans and policies for married women in tertiary institution.

METHODS

A qualitative research approach was used in this study. The population of the study consisted of married women who are schooling at the University of Education, Winneba. The size of the sample was 30 married women in the University and purposive sampling method was used to select the 30 married women in the University. The main instrument for the study was an open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaires were administered to the 30 married female students from five departments in the university. Before the administration of the questionnaire, a consent form was given to the respondents to fill. Fortunately all 30 consented to respond to the questionnaire. Each was given a day to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaires were then analyzed thematically.

RESULTS

Among the married women contacted, 10% of them were between the ages of 21 and 25 years, 13.3% of them were between the ages of 26 and 30 years and 20% of them were between the ages of 31 and 36 years. Another 33.3% of the respondents were between the ages of 36 and 40 years and 16.7% of them were found to be between the ages of 41 and 45 years while 6.7% of them were above 46 years. This indicates that majority (53.3%) of the respondents were between the ages of 31 and 40 years. Also, 20% of them are married for a period of 1 to 5 years, 50% of them had married for 6 – 10 years and 23.3% of them married for 11 – 15 years. Only 6.7% of them are married for 16 years or more. This shows that majority (73.3%) of the respondents are married for a period of 6 to 15 years. Again, 60% of the respondents have one child or two children while the remaining 40% had 3 to 4 children.

Themes that emerged from the responses

Domestic challenges that married student in the University encounter

The married women indicated that they encounter domestic challenges as students and married women. They indicated that these challenges include the inability to do cleaning, cooking and washing for the members of their families due to the academic demands and the time that they had to spend at school. Others also mentioned the fact that there is always some misunderstanding with their husbands in connection with the time they spend with them and the children. Here are excerpts:

“Inability to cook and do washing for my children is my major challenge”; “not being able to do washing and cleaning for the children and my husband was my major problem”; “Lack of time to nurture the children to become disciplined individuals was my major challenge”; “Difficulty in taking care of the children due to my absence from home for learning activities is my major problem,”. Another married woman noted: *“there used to be misunderstandings between my husband and I on the time I spend at school instead of attending to my duties at home”.*

Academic challenges that married women encounter in the University

The responses that were obtained revealed that all the respondents had academic challenges one way or the other. Majority noted that they have loaded academic work, inadequate time, and loaded household chores. For instance a student noted: *“loaded academic work that had to be completed within a short period of time is my major challenge”*. Another said *“inadequate time to study at home was my major academic challenge”* and *“my activities at home lead to my lateness to lectures most of the time”*. Another student indicated: *“I cannot concentrate during lectures due to the way I leave my home with a lot of house activities undone”*.

Causes of the challenges that they encounter as married women in the University

Some of the causes of these challenges mentioned by the married women students were finances, childbearing, lack of support from the spouse, etc. For example a student mentioned: *“I face the challenges due to financial constraints”*. Another noted: *“childbearing responsibilities was the cause of my challenges”*. A similar thing was reported by another respondent where she said: *“childbearing activities such as post- and anti-natal visits to the health center were the cause of my challenges”*. Another said, *“The spending of more time out*

of the home due to academic work at the school". The other causes that were expressed by other respondents include: "*Lack of support from my husband*", "*insecurity of leaving my husband alone at home who may take another woman in my absence*". Another respondent gave a similar reason by saying: "*lack of time to care for my husband and children at home and also travelling from home to campus everyday*".

Effect of the challenges on school performance

As students of a tertiary institution, the married women were expected to study hard to achieve their goals. A substantial number of them stated that they do not get enough time to study, a few mentioned low academic performance, and lateness or absence from lectures. These are examples off some respondents: "*I do not get enough time to study on my own*", "*low academic performance is the way the challenges affected me academically*" "*low concentration during lectures*" and "*irregular attendance to lectures*".

How they are able to cope with campus and academic work

They mentioned the fact that they ignore some house chores to make way for academic work; "*I had to ignore some of the house activities and problems in order to make way for school work*". Others engage in group discussions; "*I engage in group discussions with my friends to catch up with my lessons*". Other students also get help from husbands and relatives; "*I ask my husband to support me and do some of the work at home when I leave for school*" and "*I get help from my husband to take care of the home in my absence*"

Solutions to help solve domestic and academic issues and challenges

From the responses given by the students, most of them solve their academic and domestic issues by engaging their mothers, aunties or house helps in the house to take care of their children and other domestic activities. In the case of school, they believe most of the solutions are beyond them so asked that the assignments should be reduced and weekend lectures should be stopped.

Here are some excerpts:

"I will ask for help from family members such as my mother"; "I will tell one of my siblings to do some of the work for me"; "I will ask my aunt to give a helping hand" and "There should be an introduction of distant learning for the whole course". Others were, "there should be no assignments for students on weekends so we can get sufficient time to perform our house duties"

, "there should be a reduction in the number of programs in the course", "married women should plan to complete their education before bearing children so they can have enough time to study and not face similar challenges" and "there should be counseling sessions at school to help married women cope with the stressful University life".

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Women's participation in higher education is a means of ensuring career enhancement, personal enrichment and a medium of transformation for them. This promotes their liberation and empowerment. Women's involvement in education in Universities or pursuing further

education is not without its challenges. The study revealed that the respondents encountered various types of challenges as they combined education with home responsibilities. It was observed that difficulty in having time to care for the members of the family, lack of time to nurture children to become disciplined individuals and difficulty in taking care of the needs of the children were the major challenges that the respondents encountered.

These challenges led to low academic performance for some of the respondents and not getting enough time to study was the challenge of others. The stress that they had to go through made other respondents to exhibit low concentration during lectures. These challenges were also observed by Quartey (2003) in his study. He stated that as a result of the strains on married women's time and energy, they experience fatigue and lack of time for revision. Lee and Myers (2005) also stated that such family problems create imbalances for the married women students so much that it makes their emotional state so fragile which leads to depression and distracted attention (poor concentration) at home and at their academic work.

It was also observed in the study that the combination of marital responsibilities with tertiary education led to irregular attendance and lateness to lectures. This is in corroboration with the finding of Hallman and Grant (2004). Hallman and Grant (2004) found out that lateness to and missing classes or lectures was one of the major challenges that mothers in tertiary institutions face. According to them, when a child is sick, the mother gives attention to the care of the child at the expense of her academic work.

All the respondents have children under their care. As mothers, they were bothered with the needs of their children while they pursue their tertiary education at the University. Some had to contend with childbearing situations which include pregnancy, post- and anti-natal visits to the hospital. Similarly, Bhalalusesa (1998) reported that family responsibilities which include childbearing affect not only their participation in University education, but also career and professional development of married female students, thus preventing women in showing up their capacity and contribution to development. Asare (1997) also stressed that married women students who have children often get up very early in the morning trying to get everything done at home before going to lectures and this makes them become so tired and not very alert at classes.

Financial constraint was identified to be one of the causes of the challenges of some of the respondents. This is in agreement with the findings of Bhalalusesa (1998) who stated that the main challenges experienced by female married students is difficulty in acquiring sponsorship for their education. He said they have to compete highly in securing sponsorship that even when they are sponsored, the funds are not enough and they sometimes even fail to get funds for stationery and the typing of their assignments. This is also consistent with Moreau & Kerner (2012) report on student parent support in higher education.

In the adopted mechanism to solve their domestic problems, majority of the respondents suggested that they would ask for help from their family members. They indicated that family members like siblings, mothers, and aunts could carry out some of the activities that they were supposed to perform so that they could have enough time to perform their academic work at school and achieve the success that they had targeted for in their University education.

RECOMMENDATION/FUTURE RESEARCH

From the study it was realized that the married students encounter so many challenges in the course of their programme. In view of that the management of the University should restructure the content of the University program so that they can allocate enough time for specific subjects in order that the students will not be overburdened with too much work in a short period.

Again from the study, students attend lectures for almost all the courses. It would therefore be suggested that lecturers adopt the use of modern technological innovations by presenting some of their lectures and reading materials online so that students can access them at their various locations instead of having to converge at the campus. This will enable those with marital responsibilities to cope with both the home and school activities.

Also, the guidance and counseling department of the University should intensify their activities and have special sessions to help married women find ways of coping with school work and marital responsibilities. This can enable them to succeed in their academic pursuits.

This study took a look at challenges married women encounter in the universities. It would be recommended that future research will take a look at challenges of married men in the universities and further examine it in our polytechnics and colleges of education.

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