

# BALANCING DUAL ROLES AS MOTHERS AND STUDENTS LIKE A WALK ON A TIGHT ROPE? REFLECTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT MOTHERS AT A SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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## ABSTRACT

While opportunities for women to study at institutions of higher learning have increased compared to past generations, student mothers, specifically, are confronted with the extra burden of parenting, in combination with their academic work. Using an exploratory design within exploratory research, this study aimed to explore perceptions and experiences of student mothers enrolled at University of the Western Cape. We used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit female student mothers, who had at least one child and were registered for a full-time undergraduate degree at the institution. A total of 25 female students constituted four semi-structured focus groups, with five to seven participants in each. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, and Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time model was adopted, which allowed for a nuanced understanding of the student mother within various contexts. The study received ethics approval and institutional permission from the universities registrar and also adhered to good research ethical principles. Key themes relating to the challenges experienced by student mothers that we identified, included financial difficulties and the stress of balancing their dual responsibilities of being a student and a mother. Proximity to their children complicated their

attempt to fulfil dual roles; proximity to the child facilitated a closer bond with the child(ren), but impeded their academic performance. Geographical distance from the child(ren) facilitated their performance as a student, but often at huge emotional expense from participants. Familial support was highlighted as an important facilitator of academic performance. Family members often assisted with care of the child, allowing the student mother to engage in her role as student. Some student mothers perceived a lack of support from the university, while others acknowledged it as their own responsibility to manage their commitments to study. Despite these difficulties, many student mothers found that motherhood was a motivator for them to study, to secure a positive future for themselves and their child(ren).

**Keywords:** motherhood, subjective experiences, student mothers, dual roles, perceptions, South Africa, higher education

## INTRODUCTION

Getting education is considered a basic human right and is a vital part of economic and social development (Bhardwaj 2016; Turkkahraman 2012). Imbong (2009, 2), asserts that “education for women remains the most vital tool in the promotion of equality between men and women and in the empowerment of women to contribute fully to society”. However, in the context of pursuing tertiary education, women often face socio-economic adversity and a general disavowal of the pursuit for their psychological and physical needs (Bukhosini 2019; Ngum 2011). However, young women with children in these institutions of higher learning who are working to complete their studies (hereafter to be referred to as student mothers), seem to be particularly vulnerable (Ngum 2011). This renders that scholarly focus on their experiences and needs as a vulnerable section of the population should be a priority research area.

### Perspectives of motherhood

The more traditional views of motherhood regard womanhood as synonymous to child bearing, thus meaning that women are inherently seen from no other perspective than that of a child-bearing lens (Woodward 2003). Within this view, women are stereotyped as having the innate child-caring skills and knowledge, making them ideal primary caregivers, who (should) find fulfilment in child-rearing and experience motherhood positively (Choi et al. 2005; O’Reilly 2004). Mothers are stereotyped as being intrinsically self-sacrificing and selfless, prioritising their child(ren)’s psychosocial needs; this may be to the extent that they consider mothering to be their most ultimate pursuit, sometimes at the expense obtaining financial security through employment (Choi et al. 2005; O’Reilly 2004).

These views align with Bowlby’s attachment theory (Bretherton 1992) and Winnicott’s “good-enough mothering” (Newman 2013, 63), both which emphasise the primacy of a close

and nurturing mother-child relationship for the child's optimal development. Accordingly, a lack of attachment might result in a child who grows up emotionally and physically deprived (Sadock and Sadock 2007). The notion of "presence" is generally used as a barometer of "good mothering", such that there is an expectation that a "good" mother should be physically present in her child's life and emotionally responsive to the child's needs (Miller 2005). Traditional societal views also emphasise a "good enough" motherhood is a necessary condition for the child to develop to their full potential (Newman 2013, 63). Young mothers may, however, find it difficult to challenge society's "good mother" notion, or share their experiences of "not-so-good mothering" if these are at the expense of their happiness (Miller 2005, 5).

These more traditional views of motherhood have been critiqued for universalising women's experiences, as not all women are "natural mothers"; they also fail to consider the contextual factors that undergird motherhood (Long 2009). For instance, the notion of motherhood inherently natural and intuitive creates unrealistic expectations and places undue pressure on young mothers whose lived reality is a daily struggle adapting to motherhood (Kruger 2006). Kruger (2006) and Long (2009) argue that theories that emphasise the importance of "good enough" mothering often do not consider contextual factors like culture, the impact of single parenting and other socio-economic factors that are at play that also impact the mother's availability to the child (Kruger 2006; Long 2009). Motherhood instead needs to be seen in context, as a dynamic and oftentimes a challenging experience (Kruger 2006; Long 2009). Miller (2005) highlights the socio-political, economic and cultural contexts, as well as racial groupings and class of the mother and child as salient aspects that shape the motherhood experience.

In addition, given that the meaning that each mother assigns to motherhood is unique and varies from one woman to another, means that these individual differences and influences need to be kept in mind when student mothers' perceptions of motherhood are explored. In the South African context, parenting remains highly gendered, with women bearing primary responsibility (Ngum 2011). A high prevalence of absent fathers and single mothers contribute to this inequality (Morrell and Richter 2006; Munnik, Meyburgh, and Smith 2021; Redshaw and Henderson 2013), and many cultures maintain traditional and patriarchal views of gender roles in the family.

It is also noteworthy that institutional support focused on parental responsibility often happens within the context of marriage, as society tends to view motherhood occurring after marriage. However, this "archaic" approach does not consider the alternative pathways to motherhood (Ngum 2011). In fact, scholarly work on motherhood in the South African context has primarily focused on teenage populations at school level (Dlamini 2016; Moreira, Smith,

and Foxcroft 2009; Maphoti, Tladi, and Kgole 2014; Van Zyl, Van der Merwe, and Chigeza 2015), thus highlighting that motherhood very often – for some contexts – far predates marriage. Moreover, while there is comparatively less attention given to the unique population of young mothers in tertiary institutions (Van der Riet, Corfe, and Kubeka 2019), there remains scant research on the subjective experiences of single mothers (Kruger 2006), often with limited demographic representation (Jeannes 2002).

### **Challenges experienced by student mothers**

The documented effects of navigating the dual role of being both a student and a mother include school / university dropout, poor parenting as well as conflictual relationship with own parents, friends and family (Chevalier and Viitanen 2001; Van der Riet et al. 2019). Early childbearing has been associated with the disruption, if not a premature cessation, of the young mother's education (Hallman and Grant 2004). Sawhill (2006) identified the young mothers' need to provide for their children, particularly in the absence of other financial support, as a primary reason for them discontinuing their studies. The high levels of stress experienced, coupled with the competing demands and priorities, may contribute to marked deficits in parent-child interactions that are optimal for infant development (Letseka and Breier 2008). Related to this, a South African study, found a mother's ability to manage her finances, academic life and her ability to "mother" her offspring to be significantly predictive of her academic success (Kaufman, De Wet, and Stadler 2001). These indicate a level of maturity that may not be present in all young mothers, as they are still developing psychologically (Theron and Dunn 2006), and thus they may not be adequately prepared to negotiate the challenges of being a mother with balancing the dual roles as both mother and student. However, with stronger appraisals of social support from significant others, there may be better adaptation to the challenges that await the emerging-adult mothers in their journey to raise and care for their children (Biersteker 2012).

For many women, full-time parenting is either not desirable or financially sustainable, as there are competing demands to work and support their child(ren) and/or family financially (Miller 2005). There are, furthermore, increasing numbers of female applicants at tertiary institutions (Lynch 2008). Pillow (2004) found that encouraging young mothers to pursue their education was positively related to their academic success, and resulted in an improved ability to also focus on raising the child. Similarly, Maisela and Ross (2018) found that student mothers' hope of securing a better and more stable financial future for their children, and for self-improvement to support this desired independence often is a motivating factor for them to be relentless in their pursuit for education (notwithstanding the challenges they experience along the way). Parenting on its own is challenging and time-consuming, as is the pursuit of

tertiary education (Bukhosini 2019; Morell and Richter 2006; Sawhill 2006).

Early motherhood is considered to be detrimental to student mothers, as navigating the two roles is often a challenging and balancing act (Maisela and Ross 2018; Moghadam et al. 2017; Ngum 2011; Van der Riet et al. 2019). In order to attend to their academic tasks, student mothers need assistance with the day-to-day responsibilities concerning their children, including asking a family member to assist or paying for childcare (Maisela and Ross 2018). Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh, and Susuman (2018) highlight that students who are parents drop out of university owing to the competing demands of communal commitments and child-minding. The burden of navigating these dual responsibilities may negatively impact on student mothers' execution of both roles (Moreira et al. 2009; Van der Riet et al. 2019) and predispose them to emotional and psychological risk (Bukhosini 2019). The noted challenges of being both student and mother make these individuals particularly vulnerable, for example, to non-completion and attrition, and thus should be prioritised for support from the academic institution (Moghadam et al. 2017).

There are various systemic issues in the education system that exclude women, and in particular, women with children – whether explicitly or implicitly. Maisela and Ross (2018) argue that academic work (for example, coursework deadlines), do not cater for a student mother, but is rather tailored for a student free of any other responsibility outside the ambit of their academic work. Similarly, Ngum (2011) found that some student mothers experience their universities' overall lack of understanding of their challenges associated with being a student mother. Barnes (2013) highlights a residence policy that excludes pregnant women from residences, and argues that this reinforces the notion that the ideal student is male and childless, who is not only success driven but also unencumbered with parental responsibilities. To address the fault lines of the existing policies, Moghadam et al. (2017) highlight the need to revisit policies in order to support student mothers in overcoming the traditional perspective that motherhood and educational responsibilities are mutually exclusive phenomena that stand diametrically opposed to each other. It therefore stands to reason that, given the student mothers' experiences in these contexts, higher education institutions are important locations for advancing education through the integrated approach of immersing motherhood-centred learning and teaching that caters for student mothers.

There remains limited scholarly work on the experiences of mothers at tertiary institutions in South Africa. Therefore, it is important to explore the lived experiences of student mothers in the South African context and to identify their needs and the challenges they experience, in order to support successful completion of tertiary studies. As such, the aim of this study was to explore student mothers' perceptions of motherhood at a South African higher education

institution. The study adopted the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model as conceptual framework that facilitated the consideration of the experiences of the student mother enrolled at a tertiary institution, within various contexts such as home, community and university (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Meyers 2001), and the inter-relationship between these contexts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The study employed an exploratory research design within a qualitative approach (Babbie 2016; Creswell 2009), to gain deep insights into the student mothers' perspectives on motherhood. The perspectives of student mothers remain a largely under-researched terrain that warranted an investigation. The objectives of the study were to explore student mothers':

- Overall subjective perceptions and personal experiences of motherhood,
- Understanding of experiences of the dual roles inherent in being a student mother,
- To identify the barriers and facilitators in student mothers' study and home environments, as well as
- Understandings of the importance of education in relation to their motherhood roles.

### **Research setting**

We conducted the study at the University of the Western Cape (UWC 2013), a historically disadvantaged, research-intensive university in South Africa (Keats 2009). Historically disadvantaged institutions, such as UWC, typically have higher proportions of first-generation students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) 2012). UWC has roughly equal numbers of students from the African and Coloured communities of South Africa, and it is also growing its footprint in terms of registration of international students from the African continent. The representation of students at UWC (that reflect national targets) makes it an appropriate location to explore the subjective experiences of student mothers on motherhood, as this may enhance the transferability of the findings to other South African higher education contexts (Bless, Higson-Smith, and Sithole 2013; Koonin 2014).

The South African higher education context is volatile. There are longstanding issues with participation, retention and throughput in this context (National Planning Commission (NPC) 2011). While there are improved enrolment numbers and demographic representation (Council

on Higher Education (CHE) 2015), there are still low completion rates, with notably higher attrition rates identified among students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Cloete 2016; Scott 2018). This highlights the impact of historical segregation and discrimination in the South African context (Herman 2015; Scott 2018). Systemic issues are compounded by the challenges encountered by young people when attending higher education institutions, including fear of failure, academic and financial pressure, and accommodation struggles (Letseka and Breier 2008; Pillay 2007; Simons et al. 2019), which hinder students from reaching their full academic potential (Moreira et al. 2009).

### **Participants and sampling**

We adopted a non-probability, purposive sampling to recruit the combined 25 participants that took part in the four different focus groups. The selection criteria included: being a mother of at least one child; registered for a full-time undergraduate degree at UWC, and being between 18 and 22 years old. The first author purposely selected the first student mother; thereafter, snowball sampling was employed to recruit the other 24 participants. Five participants were in their first year of study, ten in their second year, six in their third year, and four in their fourth year. Most participants (n=22) had only one child. The participants' children were between six months and seven years old.

### **Data collection**

The study used four focus groups to collect data. Semi-structured questions were asked to provide more flexibility (Babbie 2016), allowing participants to elaborate on their responses and to support each other while they shared experiences. The focus groups had five, six, seven, and seven participants, respectively – thus yielding a total of 25 participants. The focus groups were conducted in English, the language of instruction at UWC and a common language shared by participants. The focus groups took place on the UWC main campus at a time that was convenient for the participants, between July and October 2019, each lasting approximately 90 minutes.

### **Data analyses**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. We used the thematic analysis, as described by Clarke and Braun (2013), to analyse the transcriptions. Two reviewers independently coded each transcript, to improve credibility and confirmability (Bless et al. 2013; Koonin 2014). The thematic analysis steps were applied with rigour by constructing the themes through an iterative

process that included consultation with supervisors and a mentor, to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data analysis. Reflexivity, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity, as described by Elo et al. (2014), were used as strategies for enhancing the trustworthiness of the data.

### **Reflexivity**

It remains the responsibility of the researcher to ensure acute awareness of salient factors and to be well versed in any potential biases held about the subjective experiences of participants (Dodgson 2019). The first author (out of whose master's thesis this article was generated) was cognisant of salient features such as her own background, being from African descent, her religious beliefs, being female, her age, not having experienced motherhood, being a post-graduate student, her familiarity with services on campus, etc., and how these might impact the research. Discussions with her supervisors and keeping a reflexive diary assisted with awareness of the salient factors and limited the possibility of these factors impacting the data-collection process in a significant way.

### **Ethics considerations**

The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at UWC (HS19/5/15) granted the ethics clearance, and the University's Registrar gave the institutional permission for access to, and use of, undergraduate students as research participants. The study adhered to good ethical research practice (Babbie 2016; Bless et al. 2013), including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. Careful consideration was given to protecting participants' personal identifying information in the final analysis and reporting of data, and in the secure storage of data. While we also gave participants information surrounding their option for being referred to the centre for student support on the UWC campus, if they experienced any psychological discomfort after the focus group discussions, no participant made the request, or expressed the need, for such referral.

### **FINDINGS**

We identified three categories from the thematic analysis of the data, namely: 1) perceptions of motherhood; 2) challenges identified by student mothers; and 3) social support systems. Each category included themes, as shown in Table 1.



**Table 1:** Categories and themes identified

Categories	Themes
1. Perceptions of motherhood	Motherhood as a motivation Motherhood as a burden
2. Challenges identified by student mothers	Financial challenges The challenge of dual and multiple responsibilities Sentiments regarding physical distance from the child(ren) Challenges in the educational context Challenges relating to community safety
3. Social support systems	Social support from father of the child and his family Familial social support Social support from friends and the community

(Source: Extracted from Malukele 2021).

### Category 1: Perception of motherhood

This category included perceptions of motherhood. Two themes emerged: *motherhood as a motivation* and *motherhood as a burden*. Each theme is elaborated on below.

#### **Theme 1.1: Motherhood as a motivation**

Motherhood was experienced and seen by student mothers as a motivator to complete their studies. Education was seen as a facilitator to a brighter future for mothers and their child(ren). One participant noted: “When I had my baby, that was when I felt like the need to put my life in order so that I could actually like support my baby.” (FG2: P2). Some student mothers reported experiencing motherhood as a major life-changing experience. For example, “... when you are a mother, it changes your entire life and how you see life and also how you do things, because you always have to consider the fact that you have a child.” (FG3: P3). This life change was also demarcated by a positive shift in priorities, for example, in their decision-making: “But I feel like now, whatever decision ... I am not making for me only.” (FG 1: P2).

Overall, the student mothers’ expressed narratives reflected the belief that dedication to their studies ensured a promising future for themselves and their children. Thus, from this vantage point motherhood could be seen as a motivator to work hard and persevere, as studying held a promise for a future worth striving towards. From this, it would seem that the student mothers drew strength from their experiences of motherhood, although they did not openly condone early (and possibly unplanned) pregnancy, out of awareness of the challenges that the journey of motherhood presented for them. Motherhood also highlighted the need for self-assurance, that the choice to prioritise their studies was for the good in the long run.

#### **Theme 1.2: Motherhood as a burden**

Some mothers experienced the shift in priorities as a negative experience, and thus motherhood was experienced as a burden that meant their own priorities were demoted for the sake of their

child(ren)’s needs. One mother commented:

“It’s demanding ... being a mother is not nice. It’s so sad, it’s not easy, even being a young mother is not easy and at school it’s not easy because you have so many years that you have to study. You are not working, you don’t know if you gonna [sic] find work, you don’t know if you gonna [sic] have a stable salary.” (FG3: P3).

Another mother added:

“Sometimes I don’t feel that I am living for me alone but for the child too. So, I must forget about my needs and think for the baby ..., it’s challenging to be a mother.” (FG4: P3). Another mother felt: “Like I had to change my lifestyle, because I can’t afford a good life for two people now. It’s now always about the baby and less about me.” (FG3: P7).

These student mothers all emphasised that motherhood brought an added sense of responsibility and pressure. From the student mothers’ accounts, it seemed especially challenging to prioritise different and competing responsibilities, for their children as well as their studies, which all required careful attention and time. Some student mothers thus experienced motherhood as a burden.

## **Category 2: Challenges identified by student mothers**

Five themes identified as challenges by student mothers emerged in category two; these are discussed below.

### ***Theme 2.1: Financial challenges***

A predominant theme that was identified as a barrier by most student mothers was their continuous struggle with finances to sustain their studies against the competing priority of motherhood. Student mothers experienced financial constraints which negatively influenced their ability to take care of their children, as their focus on their studies limited their ability to explore avenues for earning an income to support their children. This is demonstrated well by the following student mother: “The fact that financially I am not stable and the father of the baby is not supporting the baby, and the fact that, like, I have to depend on other people to support me and the baby as well.” (FG2: P2).

Only two mothers reported being financially stable, which can be seen as “dissenting voices” to the predominant theme of financial challenges. An example of such a statement is: “... like, I don’t experience any financial problems or anything like that, ‘cause my ‘baby daddy’ does everything for the child. So, he is very supportive.” (FG3: P3). Financial challenges were

commonly raised, particularly in terms of the competing demands of studying and supporting their child(ren). Support from other sources, for example, the father of the child, helped alleviate this challenge in some cases.

### ***Theme 2.2: The challenge of dual and multiple responsibilities***

Most student mothers indicated they found it difficult to establish a balance between the different, mutually competing, roles of being both a student and a mother: “I think, for me, my challenge is juggling to be a good mother and be a good student at the same time ... like doing my school work without thinking about my child.” (FG3: P7). Financially sustaining livelihoods, for some, meant having to adopt an additional layer of responsibility, which sometimes entailed having to be employed, in order to generate resources deemed critical for their own, the child’s, or others’ financial upkeep and well-being. To this end, these roles extended beyond being just dual, to being multiple, which further complicated navigating between these roles: “I am a mother and a student, but I still work, when I am off [my studies], I work, I work. So it’s seven days since I started [working], jah.” (FG3: P5). Having to balance dual or multiple roles presented a significant challenge for the student mothers.

### ***Theme 2.3: Sentiments regarding physical distance from the child(ren)***

The impact of the physical (and psychological) distance from their child(ren), while committing to university studies, was also evident in student mothers’ narratives. Notably, this distance entailed missing out on the child’s key developmental milestones, which, in their collective view, also adversely affected their ability to bond effectively with the child. The following student mothers’ expressions highlight this:

“... ’Cause they are at home and I am this side, I feel like I am missing out ... on their life stages as they are growing up, ‘cause I am always this side ... at the same time it’s fun, but then for me, I also feel like it’s sad ‘cause I feel like I am missing out on a lot.” (FG3: P4).

Even with the available opportunities for visiting home for family commitments or to be with their child(ren), these moments (for most student mothers) presented their own challenges. The quote below provides a student mother’s poignant frustrations about experiencing difficulties finding balance in managing her responsibilities within the home environment:

“... cause for the past two weeks I was at home [for a funeral]. ... I had my psychology assignment due which I started while I was at school, I was like, okay. I will just finish it at home, ... And, the one-time my mom had to leave me with my son, I literally couldn’t do anything, ... ‘cause he keeps like, he is eight months, so he keeps crawling ... He wants to touch the papers, ... he is brushing

the laptop, everything is just a mess, I can't focus on my school [work] while he is around." (FG3: P3).

This serves to highlight extent to which the competing priorities and demands between student life and motherhood became even more pronounced with proximity to the child and family. To this end, taking care of the children's needs was experienced as an "unwelcome" distraction from their commitment to the studies.

In a further consideration of competing priorities in the home context, there appeared to be moments in which mothers also expressed frustration over having to accept the reality that motherhood always far outweighed their commitment to the studies, even when emergency cases arose regarding their child's health and well-being. As one student mother stated: "My child is asthmatic, but the other one is fine, the other one just doesn't want to eat, so you have to spend like two hours telling him eat, eat, eat, eat, eat and you have assignments ... eat, eat, eat, eat." (FG3: P2). Thus, over and above having difficulty balancing day-to-day parental responsibilities and the demands of university, some student mothers also reported finding it difficult to determine what should be prioritised if their children also needed care, such as when the child was ill and needed medical attention.

Furthermore, guilt also seemed to be a salient sentiment that pervaded the student mothers' accounts of their experiences of the competing demands of studying and parenting. For most mothers, parenting from a distance evoked a gnawing sense of culpability over their inability to be actively involved in their children's nurturance and overall upbringing, as per the societal expectations regarding the mother as a primary caregiver. The following quote illustrates some of the guilt feelings that mothers expressed: "... also, being a student, you don't, so for me, for instance, I can't do much. But the child is also my responsibility and also even when we are at school; when you think, you always have to consider your child." (FG3: P3). The guilt expressed reflects the complex sentiments associated with physical and emotional distance from their child, and the competing demands of studying and mothering.

#### ***Theme 2.4: Challenges in the educational context***

The challenges experienced within the educational context also dominated mothers' narratives. Mothers conveyed that the support that they received on campus was inadequate to assist with challenges in their academic work or for any personal difficulties experienced. As one student mother noted: "No, we don't receive any support from anyone. Every man [sic] for themselves here on campus. Even if you book for counselling, you wait for about three months to finally get a consultation. So, nothing at all." (FG2: P6). The student mothers further expressed concern

about their diminished or disrupted ability to attend lectures and tutorials, especially when the need for prioritising their child(ren)'s needs arose.

Also cited as the biggest challenge were the difficulties pertaining to negotiating "tight" (hectic) academic deadlines, as well as the inflexibility of class attendance and the general academic timetable at the expense of the allowance for special moments such as travelling home to spend time with the child. A compounding factor in this was the student mothers' sense that, if they travelled home, they would miss out on academic work. An overall sense was that, following a sojourn at home, they would not have been able to catch up with the work they had missed – especially given the institutional focus on getting the work done within specified time frames. In essence, this "exclusively and uncompromisingly academic" focus led them to hold a dim view regarding the available support for them (as student mothers) on campus. One mother expressed some of these concerns as follows:

"I went to one of the lecturers and he was, like, no you have to suck it up and just move ... and I am like I am asking for help, and he is like, 'I know but suck it up and because you are here and you are asking for help, I understand that, but you need to put in the work ...'. So it was hard but now I am adjusted; we have a certain way of doing things." (FG3: P2).

Over and above about the student mothers' expressed perceptions of a general lack of support from their lecturers, was the need for being able to attend to their child(ren)'s needs while on campus. In this regard, there seemed to be an awareness of the existence of a crèche on campus and an eagerness to explore the possibility of accommodating their child(ren)'s needs on campus while they attended to their academic commitments. Most mothers expressed the need to have such services accessible to them: "I also feel that the crèche that is on campus is expensive and I want my child to be close to me when I am attending my lectures." (FG2: P2). Additional to the need expressed to have their children within reach or access, mothers also expressed the need for support to alleviate some of the challenges that they are facing as student mothers. To this effect, a suggestion they made to overcome these barriers was the creation of support groups for student mothers, workshops and psycho-education with a key focus on motherhood, and financial assistance as needed. The support groups would help them, they contended, to establish pathways for coping with some of the challenges they encountered as student mothers:

"I feel like [there is a need for] emotional support for me and other student mothers. So, I would say also education for student mothers of how to mother and be a student. To have people like motivational speakers and previous student mothers of how to do it or how they did it." (FG2: P6).

Clearly, students perceived the need for greater support from the institution.

### ***Theme 2.5: Challenges relating to community safety***

A prominent theme related to both physical and psychological safety emerged with the student mothers' concern about the welfare and safety of their children, whom they had left home in the care of others, especially in communities that are characterised by violence:

“I also think that being a mother is challenging because I also come from an area where crime is everyday food. I come from [*community name removed*] and there it's very difficult to even improve yourself. And there's a lot of violence too because people are always fighting. It's also not good for the child to be seeing that every day and, as a mother who is also a student, you don't know how to protect your child. She is exposed to a lot of things, like begging on the roads for money, drugs, alcohol and all sorts of things.” (FG4: P6).

The concern for the safety of their child(ren) further highlighted the need for external sources of support, whether from other social support systems to care for child(ren), or from the institution, as noted above, in having childcare available on campus, to give student mothers peace of mind and help them focus on their studies or lectures more fully.

### **Category 3: Social support systems**

This category included some of the mother's viewpoints on the importance of social support. Three themes emerged and are discussed below.

#### ***Theme 3.1: Social support from the father of the child***

Some mothers indicated having received support from their child's father or from his family. Pertaining to this, there seemed to be a collective “semblance of reprieve” or relief experiencing parenting as shared: “... my son is living with his father's family ... so I really can't say it's, I am stranded, or I cannot study. I see him during the weekends.” (FG1: P1). The student mothers who had this form of support felt that they were more able to manage their multiple roles.

Contrary to the support mentioned above, other student mothers perceived an overall lack of support from the child's father and his family, an experience that seemed to have served as a barrier to the fulfilment of their dual roles. Having to contend with both the physical and financial burden of parenting, without assistance from the father or his family seemingly impacted negatively on their ability to balance dual roles in the context of studying:

“I just feel like for some not that, like, I never wanted my baby daddy [*father of the child*], like I

never wanted us to be in a relationship but for us to co-parent ... So, I feel like he still has grudges over me leaving him, and yet he is putting the hatred to the child; he can't do anything for the child." (FG1: P5).

In some other cases, student mothers seemed to have made a personal choice to not include the child's father from the child's life, which might explain the perceived lack of support: "I broke up with her father so he has never seen her, ever in his life, 'cause I never told him I was pregnant. So, uhm ... he has no say in my angel's life. So, we have no support from him at all." (FG4: P5).

Additionally, some reported contextual factors accounted for the absence of the father in the child's life (e.g., community violence that led to the child's father's death): "The father of my child was shot [and killed] by one of his girlfriends before the baby was born, so I can't say he even knows he had a child." (FG4: P6).

As such, while (for some student mothers) there were reported benefits to having support from the father of the child and his family, this was not the lived reality for others, whether by choice or circumstances, and compounded the absence of the child's father from the child's (and students mother's) life.

### ***Theme 3.2: Familial social support***

Student mothers put emphasis on the role played by their family in their children's lives, especially when they (as mothers) were physically absent while studying. In these instances, immediate and extended family were experienced as sources of support to assist with child-rearing responsibilities: "I have my aunt who looks after the child and send[s] me the money for the school." (FG2: P2). Sharply contrasted to this was the experience, shared by some mothers, that family support was sometimes absent or not readily forthcoming. Some participants also related experiences where, with pregnancy at a young age had seemingly resulted in some family members having difficulty, or perceived reluctance, in offering the needed support. One student mother's experience is conveyed as follow:

"Even though my parents think I have disappointed them so badly that they cannot accept my child, I feel that I need to prove that having a child is not the end of the road ... [They said]'You have disappointed the whole family and mostly us as your parents'." (FG4: P4).

Familial support again facilitated student mothers' dual roles, yet there were often complex reasons for that support being withheld or absent.

### ***Theme 3.3: Social support from friends and the community***

Support from friends and the broader community seemed to play a vital role in helping student mothers fulfil their dual roles. Most mothers expressed having received support from their friends and community, partly in acquiescence to the old dictum asserting that: “It takes a village to raise a child”. Participants also reported the peer and community support as having assisted them to relate and talk about the challenges that they experienced regarding their studies, against the backdrop of their parenting. Such support seemed to have helped them “normalise” some of the challenges that they experienced, and also assisted them to speak, share and even relate to others’ similar experiences. That the support was available without a fear of judgment or rejection seemed to have containing effect for the participants: “She [a friend] is just always there, whenever I wanna like talk about my situation or about my child or whatsoever, she is just always there, giving advice and everything.” (FG1: P1).

In contrast, some mothers reported having unsupportive friends and community. In this regard, there was the implied notion of the journey through pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood as having been experienced as socially isolating, especially given the disruptions in/loss of key interpersonal and peer relationships. Some mothers reported having lost friends when they fell pregnant, and at times not being able to count on friendships for the needed support during their studies. This served to highlight the psychological distance occasioned by the sense of solitariness of the path to motherhood, especially when those are not around them were not going through the same journey. As one student mother shared:

“Ah, I lost my friend, when I was pregnant. When I gave birth [in] 2017 December, so after that I didn’t have friends ever since then. Yep, I really need friends ... they [friends] didn’t want to go out with me anymore, ‘cause I had, you know [a child].” (FG1: P1).

In addition to the lack of support from significant others, student mothers also reported challenges stemming from having to deal with the social stigma associated with being a young mother. Most student mothers, owing to their unexpected pregnancy, felt that they did not meet societal expectations of “purity” and “innocence”, and might have let themselves and others down. The subjective experience of judgment at home, within their social groups and their communities, owing to having fallen pregnant and becoming a mother at a young age was palpable, as poignantly captured in the following expression: “... ‘cause their [friends’] parents were like, ‘Don’t go out with that child’ ‘cause she is gonna teach you this and that [influence you to also get pregnant] ...”. (FG1: P2). Social support from friends and the community had the potential to ease the experience of being a student mother, yet its absence, as a result of stigma, was often noted.



## DISCUSSION

The dynamic interplay of the dual roles that student mothers have to fulfil in the context of their pursuit for education needs to be understood within the various inter-related contexts in which student mothers fulfil these roles. Using the Process-Person-Context-Time model (Bronfenbrenner 2005), the participants' child/ren, the father of their child/ren, their parents, family members, peers, the community where they lived, as well as the institution of study featured as the salient proximal systems for this study that were closely related to the student mothers and their overall perceptions of motherhood. Motherhood is generally seen as a life-changing experience. In this study, motherhood was experienced as a condition imposed on the student mother; this was evident through the range of contextual and societally defined factors, such as being a present mother in the context of adverse socio-economic conditions and financial constraints, against the backdrop of the deficits in otherwise socially and materially supportive networks. In many instances, mothers felt that adequate support networks were absent in their home and study environments. They expressed the need for awareness, better understanding and a more accommodative stance towards their challenges from their home environment, including the significant others in their lives (partners, family, friends and lecturers). This aligns with literature that highlights the impact of societal expectations of motherhood, such as it being natural, with the mother being present, self-sacrificing, sensitive and nurturing; this makes it difficult for mothers to experience optimal adjustment and adaptation to student motherhood, thus influencing their perceptions of motherhood (Hattery 2001; Kubeka 2016; Ngum 2011).

Student mothers reported having experienced irreconcilable tension between adapting to new ways of living and multiple roles, including that of being a responsible, but absent, parent. In this study, mothers generally perceived motherhood and their choice to study as a stepping stone towards a better life after graduation. This aligns with findings from Ngum's (2011) and Van der Riet et al.'s (2019) work, which found that mothers strived, through studying, to ensure a better future for themselves and their children. However, the reality of a lack of income during their studies was experienced as a significant barrier. Similarly, this finding aligned with the findings of Taukeni (2014) and Bukhosini (2019), who reported personal and financial strain as two of the significant barriers that student mothers need to face in pursuing their studies.

Student mothers also reportedly fulfilled multiple roles, among these being a mother, a provider, a student and a family member (Ngum 2011). Overall, these responsibilities, and in particular the dual responsibility that motherhood and being a student brings, weighed very heavily on most of the student mothers. Findings by Ngum (2011) emphasised that the mother is often caught up between society's stated roles, and that navigation between the different roles is often complex and stressful.

Student mothers identified various barriers in the context of home, community and university that impacted on their ability to be “good enough” mothers *and* dedicated students. The physical distance from their children impacted their ability to be an involved parent. In some cases, it also affected their study negatively, especially when their children required special attention, for example, in the case of illness. Student mothers also voiced a fear for the emotional and physical safety of their children in the community in their absence. Literature highlights the self-sacrificing responsibilities felt by student mothers as being inherently tied to motherhood (Ngum 2011). The ability of family and friends to assist in times of emergency acted as a buffer to deal with challenging situations, whilst the absence of commitment by family members exacerbated the challenges that the mothers experienced.

In addition to the challenges at home, challenges with their studies, such as the inability to gain concessions when their children required attention and the inability of lecturers to understand the impact of the challenges that motherhood brings to their learning and learning outcomes, resulted in significant experiences of distress expressed by the student mothers. The student mothers voiced the need for ongoing support, in the form of support groups or crèches on campus. As stated, the same need was expressed in terms of support from immediate family and friends. Mothers who experienced a lack of the latter felt sad, guilty and more despondent about their ability to balance the dual roles embedded in being both a student and a mother.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Student motherhood can be seen as a dynamic, positive, conducive but often challenging experience, complicated by the combined responsibilities of mothering and studying. Student mothers need to be supported to engage and cope with the dynamic interplay that responsibilities bring in the context of being both student and mother. As gleaned from the narratives of participants in different focus groups, navigating university life while also having to contend with being a mother is a difficult balancing act – more like a walk on a tight rope. A nuanced understanding of the barriers that student mothers face in the inter-related and lived contexts such as university, home and community will pave the way to identify possible interventions to assist student mothers to attend to their studies *and* their children’s needs. Financial and emotional support from significant others (that include immediate family members), and other support in taking care of their children in their absence, and a better understanding of all of the barriers that student mothers experience from the academic environment, would pave the way to a more conducive environment for student mothers to thrive in their study environments and become active citizens who could make significant contributions in society at large.

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