

STUDENT- MOTHERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR INCLUSION

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Abstract

The study investigated the challenges of student mothers in higher education. It also aimed at identifying available support system for their inclusion in higher education. The study adopted a qualitative approach and used purposeful sampling technique to select 22 student mothers aged 21–40 years, drawn from higher institutions in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Data were collected through Focus group discussion and a semi-structured interview. Data generated were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Findings revealed that the most challenging factor is combination of the dual role of academic and parental activities which to a large extent affects their academic performance. Findings also suggest that student mothers major source of support came from their husbands while the least source of support came from scholarships, grants and loans. Findings also revealed that student mothers feel very much excluded in the main stream of academics due to their inability to measure up with fellow students. The study therefore, recommended an inclusion approach by establishing student support centre, early childhood educational development center and counseling units in higher institutions to help address the issues.

Introduction

The intertwining nature of academic activities is quite challenging and this is escalated with motherhood responsibilities. The academic community focuses mainly on success, development, and never-ending competitions without providing necessary support. Therefore, taking on motherhood along with studies is quite challenging in higher education. Student-mothers' enrolment into higher education has been on increase around the world as found by (Williams, Alon, and Bornstein, 2006). A woman may enthusiastically embrace the dual roles of mother and student, however, undertaking these two roles, even in ideal conditions, can pull one person in two directions (Springer, Parker and Leviten-Reid, 2009). Combining motherhood and studying without compromising the activities of either one is a great dilemma for student mothers. When a woman must focus all her

attention on her studies, her attitude may contrast with her traditional motherhood role (Visick, 2009).

Women's participation in education is a determining factor for achieving development goals in any society (Esia-Donkoh, 2014). As a fundamental human right, every individual wants to avail his/her self the opportunity of self development hence the existence of student mothers irrespective of their status which is quite different from other students. Student mothers are the largest and rapidly growing student demography in institutions of higher learning around the world since 1966 (Williams, Alon, and Bornstein, 2006). This group of students is inspiring and hard-working, trying to make the most out of every available chance (National union of students, 2008). Thus being a student mother coupled with the responsibility of caring for a little child should not be perceived as a hurdle to engaging in education and training (Brooks, 2012).

Being a student mother entails a parallel role combination of parenting and academic activities. The intertwining of these two roles is a challenging competition considering the volume of responsibilities it forces on such students. Student mothers face numerous challenges in the bid to acquire education. Retention is a major problem, in spite of the exact ratio of student mothers dropping out which remains unknown (Moreau and Kerner, 2012). Other challenges include care-giving activities and inability of the students to graduate from school with a degree (IWPR, 2013), anger, loneliness, restlessness, skipping lectures, failing of some courses (Taukeni, 2014). With these and few other problems facing student mothers in the higher institutions, provision of a form of support should be seen as a very pertinent strategy to be adopted for alleviating their pains and sorrows.

The extant body of literature – though small – has, however, played an important role in highlighting some of the difficulties faced by student-parents in the UK. These include: the challenges of juggling the temporal demands of being both a student and a parent of a young child; the paucity of on-site childcare facilities; restrictive 'no child on campus' policies; late availability of timetables; inconvenient timing of lectures; and acute financial pressures (Alsop et al. 2008; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Osborne et al., 2004). Similar findings have emerged from the US (Lynch, 2008). Research has also highlighted the tension experienced by many women between their identity as a mother and their identity as a student; indeed, Alsop et al. (2008) note that 'the fact that women have been traditionally the careers in the family, and that students have been conceptualized as male and non-careers, influences...the ways in which they are perceived by others, and also the manner in which their own identity is reconstructed' (p.629). It is argued that such tensions

result in complex activities while in the university. These are studies conducted in the western countries. To the knowledge of the researchers, no study has been conducted in Ebonyi State, Nigeria on student mothers and their challenges.

There is a consensus among education stakeholders that inclusion is the best practice for providing services for students with special needs. Student mothers face challenges which inhibit active participation in their academic endeavor in higher education. Studies have shown that some of the student mothers do not feel themselves to be valued and as belonging within their university cultures (Haggis, 2018). This work set out to investigate Student mothers' challenges and available support systems for inclusion in the university environment. It asks the question: What are the student mother's challenges in higher education and available support system for inclusion?

Students tagged Special group include a wide range of students, particularly those who have been conventionally excluded, either formally or unofficially. Sometimes the university managements care less about the coping abilities of students under the special groups or with special needs including student mothers in their institutions. Moghadam, Khiaban, Esmaili and Salsali (2017) noted that the academic society focuses mainly on development, never-ending competitions and success without providing any form of support to the student mothers. Duquaine-Watson (2007) asserted the noticeable lack of attention to the experiences of women undergoing degree programs combined with child-rearing. In as much as student mothers are entitled to their rights to education and fall between the group of students with special needs, their academics need to be supported by institutions to understand their exceptional circumstances. Student mothers should enjoy and benefit from in-class support by their teachers or lecturers. Institutions can support their student mothers by providing child care centers or crèche for their new born babies, University nursery and primary schools, health centers, counseling services.

The current study purposed to investigate and describe the experiences of student mothers in tertiary institutions in Ebonyi State. The findings would be used to develop educational policies to accommodate student mothers and make possible the provision of suitable support services for them. Also, findings of the study will help universities to develop evidence-based programs which effectively meet the needs and aspirations of student - mothers, and enable them to overcome the challenges they face when accessing and participating in Higher Education.

Springer et al. (2009) found that student mothers experience unpleasant emotional pressures and receive negative feedback from the academic setting,

implying that education is the first priority. Moreover, prejudice towards student mothers and the labeling of them as non-productive stimulate avoidance behaviors and a discriminatory allocation of educational resources to other students. Therefore, some student-mothers avoid bringing their child to school while others hide their parenting roles (Williams, Alon, and Bornstein, 2006). From an academic stand point bringing their child to school indicate that the student mother does not have the required academic drive and steps for proper development (Adofo, 2013).

Moreau and Kerner (2013) investigated the experiences of Iranian student mothers with the role of motherhood, and found that simultaneously being a student and a mother was challenging, yet manageable, requiring planning in various fields. Adofo (2013) found that Ghanaian student mothers used simultaneous management strategies and organization approaches to adapt to contradictions resulting from concurrent tasks. Similarly, Forster and Offei-Ansah (2012) reported that student mothers used a variety of strategies, such as delegating domestic roles, prioritizing, planning, and organizing activities to ensure that their family life did not suffer while they were at university.

In a study on domestic challenges to academic goals, Esia-Donkoh, (2014) found that one example of sacrifice was the need to spend time with a sick child at the cost of losing educational goals. He also found that one cause of emotional turmoil and stress for student mothers was their child's illness. Almost all student mothers stated that the fear of losing a child to illness was so great that they stayed with their sick children all the time until they got well, even if it prevented them from attending to academic tasks.

Esia –Donko (2014) found that the combination of maternal and academic responsibilities is challenging to the extent that it brings physical and psychological pressures, and affects academic activities. In addition, some student mothers were further employed, which could double the overall load of stress resulting from their multiple roles of student, mother and employee (Ugwu, Orjiakor, Enweruzor, Onyedibe, and Ugwu, 2016). Though these studies examined challenges of student mothers, none looked at inclusive measures for full participation and engagement in school activities. Most of the studies were done outside Nigeria.

Providing support systems is essential for student mothers' participation in Higher institution. Wainwright and Marandet, (2010) observed that getting support was necessary for simultaneous management of the roles of mother and student. Obviously, finding compatibility between the identities of mother and student can be challenging. Familial support can empower student mothers and reduce the impact of the student role on their maternal

and family life, especially on the children. Family and friends are the most common sources of support for student mothers with family responsibilities (Xuereb, 2014). Specifically, near and distant relatives, especially mothers, spouses, friends, teachers, and classmates, provided support to student mothers while in University (Adofo, 2013). Similarly, Adu-Yeboah, (2015) found that the support given by university lectures, authorities, and classmates also facilitated the implementation of student mothers' educational tasks. Moreover, the flexibility of educational schedules and the cooperation of educational staff are invaluable factors in a student mother's education.

Schmidt and Umans (2014) in their gender-based study found that female students faced more problems in adapting to their study programs, had more systematic cultural challenges and limitations, and received less support. Stressing the issue of limitations and barriers, Brooks (2013) found that family disputes and disharmony was also a major barrier to student mother's education. Such a dispute may be the result of a husband's dissatisfaction with the education of the student mother and eventual withdrawal of necessary support to her.

Archer (2013) noted that a major setback in a student mother's education and support was due to a lack of belief in the importance of education for mothers. Adofo (2013) added that one important factor affecting the achievement of married women in higher education was the expectations and attitudes of husbands. He further found that a reduction of marital satisfaction among full-time student mothers depended on changes in the woman's role in the family and her husband's response to these changes. Nevertheless, some student mothers received no support from their husbands as their husbands disagreed with their education.

Bullen, Kenway and Hey (2000) in a study on new labor, social exclusion and educational risk management found that about 70% of student mothers in New York universities abandoned their education because of a lack of support from society and the family.

Growing concern about giving to the idea of providing equal opportunities for everyone with special educational needs in higher education have encouraged that inclusive education should be a key focus for institutional attention. Nigeria made her commitment to inclusive education by declaring that one of its aims is "To give meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children their physical, sensory, mental, psychological, or emotional disability notwithstanding" (Federal Government of Nigeria, FGN, 2004). Inclusive education is the full integration of learners with special needs and other learners into the same classrooms and schools thereby exposing them to the same learning opportunities while providing for

the optimal development of every learner (Obidoa and Onwubolu, 2011). Those with “special needs” include all children and young people with and without disabilities or difficulties learning together in ordinary pre-primary, primary schools, colleges, and universities with appropriate network support” (CSIE, 2011). Furthermore, Key element used to describe inclusive education (Evans, 2007:1) are: “Setting suitable learning challenges, responding to pupils diverse learning needs, and overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils”. This implies that inclusive education aims at reducing educational failure and maximizing potential for all children with schools supporting children’s holistic development and helping to remove barriers to achievement (Evans, 2007).

Inclusion is not a strategy to help people fit into the systems and structures, which exist in our societies. It is about transforming those systems and structures, to make a better world for everyone (Diane Richler). Inclusion considers the need to assume that there will be diverse and different students in our universities in terms of aspects of identity, ways of learning, and support needs. It also acknowledges and values diversity including in terms of gender, ethnicity, and disability. The idea behind Inclusive education is to address diversity issues in practice in our higher education and classroom teaching. It is worthy to note that some students are excluded from and within higher education. This therefore, calls for the need to acknowledge the further barriers (in individuals’ lives and the University itself) that prevent students from entering universities and that might inhibit their participation and successful outcome for them in higher education.

Students mothers must not only be included in university statistics and probably be physically present in classroom, they must feel themselves to be valued and as belonging within their university cultures (Haggis, 2018). This benefits the student, family, lecturers, university, society and the economy. There is need to therefore reflect on how to engage our student mothers through teaching practice and by developing institutional support mechanisms. Explicit and implicit assumptions of an ideal student – a bachelor boy must be avoided (Edwards, 1993). Actively creating a learning environment in which we assume that students may be dealing with unseen challenges, and anticipating this in our approach to teaching and supporting students should be encouraged.

Such generic good approach and practices are as follows: Peer Assisted Learning is a structured peer-tutoring programme that was awarded the “best practice” status by the US Department of Education. In the simplest terms, it can be described as students working together to support each other learning. This strategy has proven advantages to the student-tutors, the tutees, and their

teachers. It strengthens the students' academic skills and gives them the opportunity to practice their social skills with peers in a natural setting. Relatively little study has investigated inclusive education measures for the student mothers in universities in Nigeria. The current paper therefore aims to address the issue.

Method

The study was carried out in higher institutions in Ebonyi State. Ebonyi is one of the South Eastern States of Nigeria and it is considered an educationally disadvantaged state. Ebonyi State currently has five higher institutions of learning. They are Alex-Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Federal College of Agriculture, Ishiagu, Ebonyi State College of Education, Ikwo and Federal Polytechnic, Uwanwa Afikpo. The study is therefore relevant because of the need for inclusive education for all including students with special needs (student mothers) to encourage full participation in higher education for sustainable national development.

Qualitative data collection took place between June and July, 2018 and included focus group and one-on-one discussions with 22 student mothers in higher institutions in Ebonyi state. The participants were purposefully selected to investigate the experiences and challenges of student mothers, support systems and inclusive measures in tertiary institutions in Ebonyi State. The interviews which lasted between 30 and 40 minutes in groups of four took place within university premises. Their background information was also collected using a semi structured questionnaire. The research underwent ethical conduct. Informed consent was obtained verbally from student mothers prior to participation in the study. Text analysis and coding were conducted manually as suggested by Creswell (2013) following methods laid out by him. The final transcribed text was produced. Codes were then grouped into categories. Finally, the text for each category was collected into one place for final analysis. Quantitative data generated were analyzed using descriptive statistics including percentages.

Results

Background information of respondents

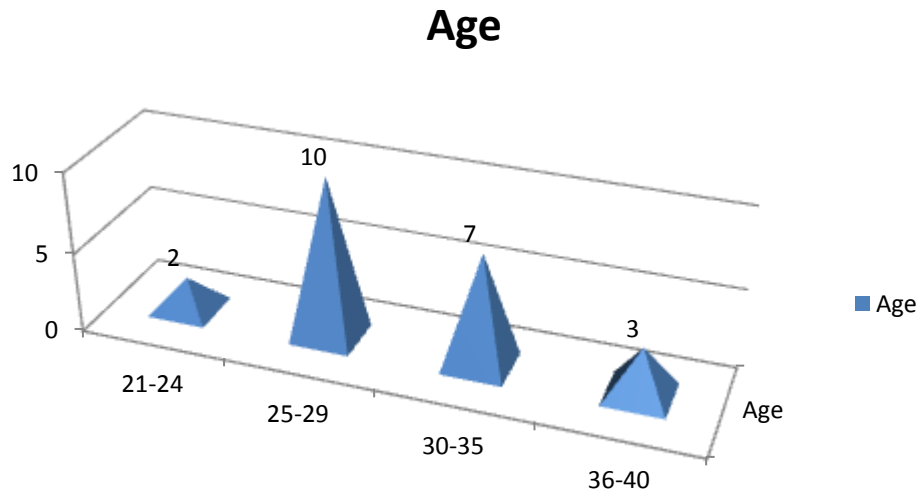


Figure 1: Age Characteristics of the Participants

Results from Figure 1 shows that the majority of the participants are within the age range of 25-29 years, followed by 30-35 years. The least in age of the cohort is 21-24 years, and 36-40 years.

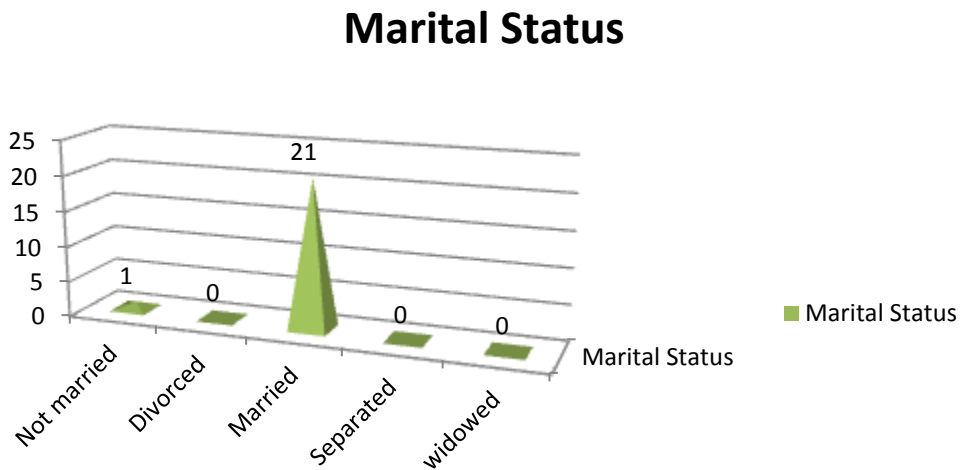


Figure 2: Marital Status of respondents

Results suggest that most of the respondents are married (21), 1 single parent and none of them was neither separated nor divorced.

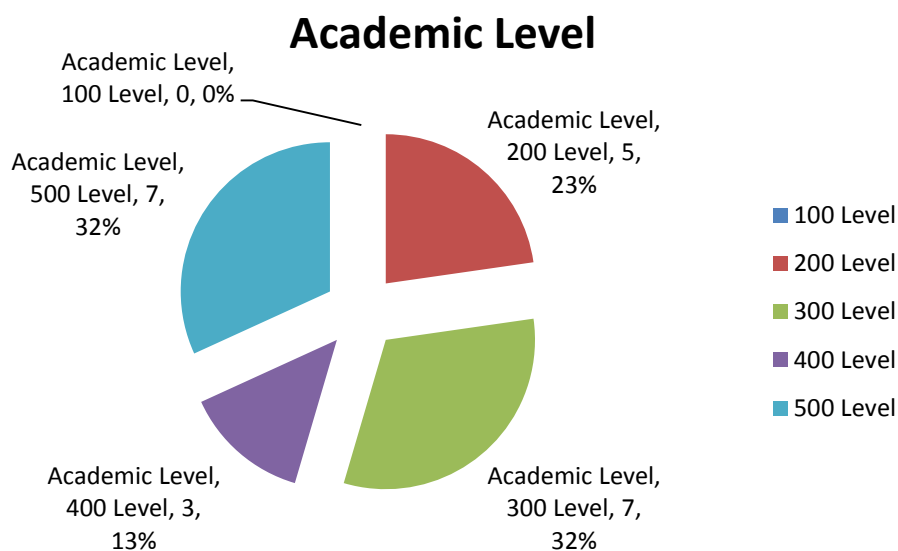


Fig 3 Academic Level

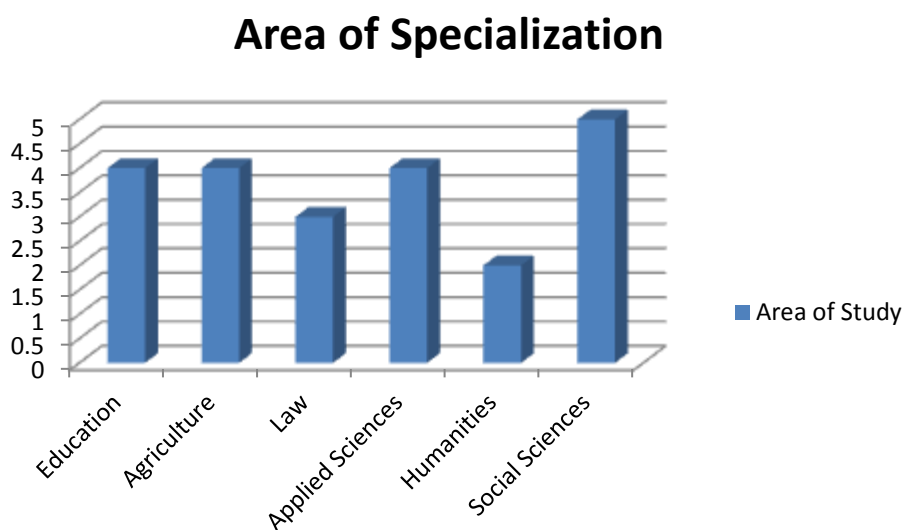


Fig 4 Area of Specialization

Result from Figure 4 revealed that participants cut across faculties in the five tertiary institutions with majority of the students from faculty of Social Sciences.

Table 1. Occupational status / work load and work effect on academic studies

Occupation Status	Percentage %	Work load during school sessions	Percentage %	Effect of your job on school work	Percentage%
Government Employed	18.1%	I have no job	22.7%	I don't have a job	22.7%
Self Employed	54.5%	I work 1-10 hrs per Wk	22.7%	No job interference	9%
Others	27.3%	I work 11-20 hrs per week	22.7%	My job takes sometime from my school work	31.8%
		I work 21-30 hrs per week	13.6%	My job Takes a lot of time from my school work	36.4%
		I work 31-40 hrs per week	18.1%		

*Note: population = 22

Table 1 shows that most of the participants (54.5%) are self employed, 18.1% are government employed, and other kinds of employment (27.3%). Result also showed that 22.7% of the student mothers had no job, 22.7% with jobs indicated that they worked for 1-10hrs per week, 13.6% worked for 21-30 hrs per week, while 18.1% worked for 31-40 hrs per week. Regarding the effect of work on academic activities, 22.7% of the students indicated that they had no job, 9% indicated no job interference, 31.8% indicated that their job takes sometime from their school work while 36.4% indicated that their jobs take a lot of time from their academic work.

Table 2 Students Accommodation

Accommodation	Percentage	With whom Do You Leave ?	Percentage
Campus	0%	With one or more students	5 =22.7%
Off Campus	100%	With my parents	0 = 0%
		With my husband and children	14 =63.6%
		Other relatives	3 = 13.6%

Table 2 shows that all the participants reside off campus with husbands, children and relatives

Table 3: How University Expenses of Student Mothers in Higher Institutions were met

	None	Very little	Less Than Half	About Half	More Than Half	All or Nearly All	Percentage of supports received	Percentage of support not received
Self (job, savings, etc.)	10	1	4	4	3	0	54.5%	45.5%
Parents	10	3	4	4	0	1	54.5%	45.5%
Spouse or partner	4	4	1	2	5	6	81.8%	18.0%
Employer support	1	2	0	0	0	0	9.0%	4.5%
Scholarships	22	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%	100%
Grants	21	0	0	1	0	0	4.5%	95.5%
Loans	20	2	0	0	0	0	9.0%	90.0%
Other sources	20	1	0	0	1	0	9.0%	90.0%

Results on Table 3 suggest that student mothers' academic needs are mostly met by their spouses (81.8%), some are met by savings made from their salaries (54.5%), by their parents (54.5%). The least support comes from scholarships, grants and loans.

Discussions

1. Challenges

Combining motherhood and studying without compromising the activities of either one is a great dilemma for student mothers (Vissick, 2009). The findings of the current study support this statement. Findings of the current study suggest that student-mothers in tertiary institutions in Ebonyi State expressed that the most challenging factor is combining academic activities and taking care of their children and house chores which hinder their progress in school.

It has not been a wonderful experience for me as a student mother. I have more or less divided my attention between my studies and my baby. Even when I try to balance my attention on both, it does not always work because when I have an urgent need to attend to my baby, I would have to forget everything about academics. Sometimes I am not able to prepare very well for my quiz because of my baby. He would wake up in the middle of the night and I would have to

breastfeed him to enable him sleep off again. Sometimes I find myself dosing in the class when a lecture is going on because I don't get enough rest due to so many things to do in the house when I come back from school. (Nkechi, July 2018).

Furthermore, one of the student mothers expressed thus;

Problem of attending to house chores even at the expense of my studies is a big challenge for me. Sometimes I miss my class or quiz because I took my sick child to the hospital for medical attention (Beatrice, July 2018).

Another student said,

Every morning I had to prepare food for the whole family of eight persons including my father in-law and other relatives. I would still attend to my children and get them ready for school before I go for my lectures. I had my brothers' in-law who lived with us. As the custom is in Africa, a wife is expected to be the servant all the time. That I was a student made no sense to them nor make them empathize with me. In fact their presence in the house worsens everything for me. Sometimes when I quarrel with them in the house, I feel so depressed that reading my book becomes a difficult task (Abgonma, July 2018)

This finding is also supported by Nwajiuba, (2017). When a woman must focus all her attention on her studies, her attitude may contrast with her traditional motherhood role (Visick, 2009). This could be attributed to the fact that both responsibilities are time and energy demanding. Findings suggest that some students have financial challenges while in the school which resulted to not being able to provide educational materials, pay school fees and other fees, and even attend to other family financial needs. To buttress this, one of the student mothers expressed this;

Financial support is so limited and it is difficult sometimes to procure the textbooks that I need in the school or even pay for my school fees. I remember an occasion where I called on my husband asking for money, his response was that he had no money. I started quarreling with him on the phone (Nkoli, July 2018).

As the student narrated this to one of the researchers, she began to cry. It was a tough one for her indeed remembering her past experience. This challenge predominantly correlates to students' socio-economic background (Read et al, 2003). This could be attributed to the fact that some of these student mothers have their children who are being trained by the same husband / father who have possibly only one source of income.

Findings suggest that school related challenges included difficulty in meeting up with deadlines with submitting assignments and projects. When another participant was asked about the school related challenges, she said this;

Two other student mothers had this to say;

Sometimes, I find it difficult to cope with the strict school time table either for submission of my seminar papers or take home projects. I even miss out participating actively in group assignments because I have to attend to my family needs in addition to my work load in the office (Nmesoma, July 2018)

It is hard to combine work with school and being a mother. Immediately after I put to bed, I started my final semester exams. I wrote some of those exams without adequate preparation because I just had a baby. I know that when I read, I understand, but immediately I drop my books and gets into the hall, I don't know what happens again, I would forget everything I read. I found it difficult retaining and re-calling what I read during exam or quiz. I remember a particular paper I wrote, I couldn't re-call any thing I read in the hall. In fact I could not write satisfactorily, I cried from the hall till I got home that day because I thought I will fail the course (Angela, July 2018)

The above experience may likely be attributed to post partum related ailment after delivery. According to American Mental Health (2018), women may experience postpartum psychosis (PPP) which occurs within the first two to three weeks following childbirth. Its symptoms include among other things mental symptoms: Extreme confusion, memory loss, incoherence (AMH, 2018).

2. Sources of Support

Regarding sources of support systems, majority of the student mothers examined expressed that their prominent sources of support come from their husbands. This could be attributed to the fact that husbands are culturally

meant to take full responsibility of their wife's welfare including her education and wellbeing. Educated husband who understands the benefits of women education offer huge support to his wife to enable her actualize her goal. Also finding of this study suggest that the university management is doing so little to support such students and others with special needs. This explains why most of the student mothers seek employment to augment whatever support they receive from their husbands. Other identified sources of support were assistance from fellow students. These friends assisted them by staying and looking after their children while they went for lectures. Relatives too were mentioned as sources of support for their education in terms of finance.

3. Inclusive measures

Some of the student mothers indicated that they received some inclusive measures to encourage full participation in academic activities to enable them progress smoothly. Some of these measures as expressed by students include; mop-up formative assessment, counseling sessions and assistance received from peers. Some students reported that;

On one of the occasions I missed a quiz, the lecturer in charge noticed my absence and when I reported to him, he administered a mop-up to me saying that it is his desire that I would graduate the same time with my fellow students. Some of the lecturers give group assignments as a way of inclusion for the student mothers (Orienna, July 2018)

During my seminar defense, of course when I had my third baby, my supervisor sent his driver to come and pick me from my house for the defense. When I got there, he allowed me to make the first presentation and go home because of my new born baby (Ijeoma, July 2018)

Interestingly these measures were given mostly by male lecturers. They seem to sympathize with the status of student mothers and so deemed it fit to do the little they could to give them a sense of belonging in the classroom. In fact, their narratives disclosed female lecturers' resentment vis-à-vis being pressurized to choose between being a parent and being a student. The students had these to say;

My male lecturers were more accommodating, caring and concerned than the female lecturers whom I thought should have been more understanding. In fact I thank God that those male lecturers were there. They were always encouraging me verbally

and also fixed some quizzes at the time it suited me most because of my baby (Ginika, July 2018).

The concern expressed by the male lecturers could be attributed to the fact that some of them are husbands whose wives have gone through similar experiences.

Conclusion

The study investigated student mothers' challenges in the higher institutions in Ebonyi State and available support systems as well as inclusive measures. Findings of the study revealed that student mothers in the higher institutions in Ebonyi State experienced challenges which are identified by student mothers in other parts of the world.

Such challenges range from; combining dual roles of caring for the family and attending to academic work, financial related challenges, family related challenges and school related challenges. The student mothers received major financial support from their husbands who took care of their expenses while in school. Few of them received support from their family members. Friends supported and assisted them equally by caring for their babies at home. No sort of institutional support system was mentioned by the interviewed student mothers.

Recommendations

There is need for establishment of childhood educational development centers in the higher institutions in Ebonyi State to provide accessible and affordable childcare on campus. This will enable them to better provide for their families and equally achieve their educational goals.

There should be establishment of student supports and centers in the form of loans, grants, scholarships, counseling centers, educational materials and their likes.

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