Coping strategies student-mothers employ in pursuing higher education studies in Tanzania: A qualitative study

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Abstract

This study explored the coping mechanisms employed by student-mothers pursuing higher education studies in Tanzania. The study involved 16 student-mothers with children aged two years and below. It used semi-structured interview to collect data, which was subjected to thematic analysis. The study found the use of problem focused coping strategies more than emotion-focused coping strategies. The problem-focused coping employed include engaging in part-time jobs and small businesses to manage financial challenges, hiring part time babysitters and using friends/relatives to take care of the child while in class, engaging in private studies during daytime, interacting with hardworking students and severing links with lazy friends. Social support networks, especially support from partners and relatives, were found vital in coping with multiple roles student-mothers perform in higher education institutions. Some coping strategies such as part-time jobs and small businesses created additional time management challenges to student-mothers. Thus, universities should establish strategies aimed to improve retention of student mothers in higher education institutions. These strategies include establishing special hostels for student-mothers to stay with their children and baby assistants while pursuing their studies or establishing day-care centres with professional care-givers to assist student-mothers in caring for their children while studying. There is also a need to empower student-mothers with life skills for them to balance time for studying and parenting. Finally, university authorities should treat student-mothers as student with unique needs that differ from those of male students and other women students without children.

Keywords Coping strategies · Parenting · Student-mothers · Problem-focused coping · Emotion-focused coping · Gender

Introduction

Despite numerous efforts made to increase enrolment of girls in education at different levels of education over the years, the percentage of out-of-school girls is slightly higher than that of boys. For example, 54% of the 72 million out-of-school children are girls (UNESCO, 2010). Even those with access to education reportedly face numerous challenges, which tend to affect their overall participation and, ultimately, their education achievement. Whereas getting pregnant in primary and secondary schools of most of the African countries spells doom and discontinuation from studies, this is not the case in higher education institutions where pregnant and student-mothers continue with their studies even after giving birth (Esia-Donkoh, 2014; Matiba & Kisanga, 2021).

Yet the challenges experienced by women pursuing higher education differ significantly depending on whether they are pregnant or not; have a young child aged 0–2 years or not; are single or married student-mothers; are financially secure or not; have readily available support from a partner/relative or not. Whereas a pregnant woman in higher education institution could be accommodated in university hostels, a mothering student cannot. Indeed, giving birth and becoming a mother force the student-mother to look for alternative off-campus accommodation primarily because most university hostels have a policy of not granting accommodation student mothers with their children (Funiba, 2011; Matiba & Kisanga, 2021; Lyonette et al., 2015). In consequence, off-campus living arrangements create additional challenges to the student-

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mothers. It seems that education system of higher learning institutions in Africa does not consider the unique needs of parenting women. Consequently, women in higher education studies encounter numerous challenges due to systemic limitations to consider their needs. These challenges include stigmatisation and discrimination; lack of support from teachers/lecturers, home and the community; financial constraints; balancing their multiple roles (student, mother, wife/daughter); time management; accommodation challenges; unreliable baby-sitters and psychological challenges (Brown & Watson, 2010; Esia-Donkoh, 2014; Funiba, 2011; Karimi, 2015; Lyonette et al., 2015; Moreau & Kerner, 2013; Matiba & Kisanga, 2021). Significantly, Karimi (2015) found that young mothers encountered exceptional challenges of balancing their multiple roles so much that some of them ended up dropping out. Overall, performing multiple roles as a mother and a student affect their participation in education (Matiba & Kisanga, 2021). The major challenge reported in the literature is time management complicated by the parenting-studying conflict student-mothers endured. Managing parenting and studying tends to be complicated by the often inflexible university timetable that fails to accommodate the unique needs of student-mothers (Lyonette et al., 2015; Moreau & Kerner, 2013). Sometimes, student-mothers face a dilemma of attending to their sick children while they are required to attend lectures/tests or examinations at the same time. Consequently, student-mothers end up missing these lectures, tests or examinations (Esia-Donkoh, 2014; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2013). Furthermore, many of these student-mothers also tend to come from poor family backgrounds, thus usually experiencing financial difficulties to cater for childcare and education expenses (Lyonette et al., 2015) in an already strained and cash-strapped environment.

Also, such student-mothers contend with stigmatisation, discrimination and negative comments from different people in their respective conservative African societies (Karimi, 2015; Matiba & Kisanga, 2021; Zahra et al., 2017). The stigmatisation resulted from the African society belief that having a child out of wedlock is a shame and disgrace to the family (Karimi, 2015). In consequence, student-mothers experience negative comments and social stigma not only from their parents and siblings but also from their neighbours who forbid their daughters to interact with young student-mothers fearing purported bad peer influence. Karimi (2015) claimed that the social stigma, discrimination and negative treatments that student-mothers receive from the society result in emotional and psychological distress. In this regard, teachers/lecturers are not excluded as some of them are guilty of pouring such social stigma, discrimination and negative treatments on student-mothers in many an African community contrary to societal expectations. In fact, empirical evidence shows that some of these educators perceive student-mothers as under-achievers, indolent, and a bad influence on the behaviour of other young girls (Runhare & Vandeyar, 2012). Social stigma and discrimination from parents, siblings and teachers/lecturers resulted in the student-mothers lack of or getting poor support (Arlington Public School, 2004) at the time when they needed all the support they could get. Stigma and discrimination from teachers is also associated with student-mothers' decision to drop out of education. Against this backdrop, student-mothers develop different strategies to manage the challenges experienced in their academic journey and navigate successfully against odds in higher education studies and achieve their educational goals. Similarly, higher education institutions should establish support mechanisms aimed to reduce barriers to higher education participation student-mothers experience due to their multiple roles as students, mothers, and wives/daughters.

The Concept of Coping

Coping involves various efforts an individual employ to overcome a situation perceived as demanding or challenging (Aldwin, 2011; Carver, 2011; Carver & Vargas, 2011; Chao, 2011; Folkman, 2011; Folkman, 2013; Lazarus, 1993; Taylor & Stanton, 2007). These strategies include anything that a person in a stressful situation utilises to overcome an encounter regardless of how effective the strategy is in managing the situation (Chao, 2011; Lazarus, 1991). Implicitly, both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies can help to manage an encounter. Whereas adaptive coping involves the use of positive approaches (Taylor & Stanton, 2007; Thompson et al., 2007), maladaptive coping employ negative approaches such as confrontation or substance abuse to manage an encounter (Andersson & Hägnebo, 2003; Givon & Court, 2010; Kisanga, 2020). In this regard, coping refers to the capacity to reach successfully the stage of self-adjustment irrespective of whether the problem has been solved or not. Lazarus (1991) claim that coping could also involve avoiding, tolerating, minimising and accepting a stressful situation.

Categories of Coping Strategies

Coping is of two major types: Problem-focused and Emotion-focused (Chao, 2011; Folkman, 2011; Lazarus, 1993; Thompson et al., 2007). On the one hand, problem-focused coping strategies are action-centred aimed to solve the problem (Chao, 2011; Lazarus, 1991). These strategies involve both personal and collective efforts, seeking social support, and support from governmental and non-governmental organisations (Kisanga, 2020; Lazarus, 1993; Thompson et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2011; Zhao & Fu, 2020). Literature associate social support with individuals' ability to employ problem-focused coping (Chao, 2011). In this regards, individuals with high social support have a likely hood to manage stressful situations using problem-focused coping unlike those with low social support. The uses of problem-focused coping

results not only to permanent solution to the problem but also it brings peoples' well-being and make individuals more optimistic and persistent during coping process (Chao, 2011; Sarid et al., 2004). On the other hand, emotion-focused coping strategies aim to regulate negative emotions of individuals in a stressful situation (Lazarus, 1991; Kisanga, 2017, 2020). In other words, problem-focused coping targets the actual problem whereas emotion-focused coping deals with negative emotions/feelings. Impliedly, those who employ problem-focused coping can find permanent solution to the problem as those concentrating on emotion-focused only obtain temporary relief from negative emotions (Chao, 2011; Kisanga, 2020; Lazarus, 1993). Emotion-focused coping strategies include avoidant coping strategy, distancing, positive comparison, treating a problem as an opportunity rather than a challenge, positive reappraisal, encouragement, moral and psychological support (Chao, 2011; Kisanga, 2020).). The decision on whether to use problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies depends on an individual interpretation of the problem. Those who perceive the challenging situation as manageable usually opt for problem-focused coping as opposed to those who interpret an encounter as uncontrollable, who go to choose emotion-focused coping strategies (Kisanga, 2020; Lazarus, 1993).

Coping Strategies Student-Mothers Employ

Student-mothers reported using several strategies to overcome challenges experienced in higher education institutions. The strategies reported involve the use of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. To cope with the challenges of parenting and studying, some student-mothers reported extensive use of social support networks, especially of older parents or caregivers (Esia-Donkoh, 2014). Esia-Donkoh (2014) documented the use of social support networks in taking care of children while the student-mother was in class. These social support networks include women who are relatives such as mothers and mothers-in-law and other women who are not relatives, for example, land ladies and house helps. Most of the women who are non-relatives received some remuneration depending on their experience in attending children whereas those baby-sitters, who were related to student-mothers, were largely unpaid. Indeed, managing multiple roles made student-mothers require support from the community irrespective of the mother's age and socio-economic status (Breheny & Stephens, 2007).

Overall, coping with parenting and studying requires a combined effort from an individual mother and others around her such as siblings, parents, in-laws, partners and teachers/lecturers. Teachers/lecturers are crucial in assisting student-mothers to cope using both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Whereas the former approach may involve providing extra teaching hours and/or remedial classes for student-mothers to compensate what they missed due

to timetabling challenges (Karimi, 2015), the latter includes encouraging and giving the much needed moral and psychological support to the student-mothers. Other problem-focused coping mechanisms reported in literature include the use of mobile phones. Some student-mothers employed mobile phones to communicate with baby-sitters when children demanded their attention (Esia-Donkoh, 2014).

Karimi (2015) reported student-mothers' use of maladaptive coping strategies. Some student-mothers who could not endure social stigma and prejudice opted to drop out of university. This avoidance strategy also resulted in some pregnant students hiding their pregnancy and/or skipping school for some time to overcome stigma, prejudice and discrimination from fellow students and teachers. In this regard, Esia-Donkoh (2014) found extensive use of emotion-focused coping such as withdraw and weeping among student-mothers whereby some were comforted by their friends whereas others kept their problems to themselves.

Rationale of the Study

Studies on female students in higher education have focused mainly on issues related to enrolment, academic achievement, pregnancies, and challenges hindering their effective participation in such education (Brown & Watson, 2010; Esia-Donkoh, 2014; Funiba, 2011; Karimi, 2015; Lyonette et al., 2015; Moreau & Kerner, 2013; Matiba & Kisanga, 2021; Ngumuo, 2019). Studies on coping have focused more on coping with stress in general, individuals with chronic illnesses and people/students with disabilities but less on coping with multiple roles performed by student-mothers pursuing higher education studies (Berry & Kingswell, 2012: Kisanga, 2020; Lazarus, 1993; Thompson et al., 2007). Those few studies which addressed coping among student-mothers originated from outside Tanzania and have treated coping as one of the objectives and not the focus of the entire study (Esia-Donkoh, 2014; Karimi, 2015). As the number of student-mothers is rising in higher education institutions with university authorities increasingly focusing more on strategies to raise enrolment of women while neglecting strategies aimed to address challenges student-mothers faced, there was a need to conduct this study to explore the coping mechanisms student mothers employ in Tanzania's higher education institutions.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were to:

i. Explore the coping mechanisms student-mothers employ to manage the challenges they experienced in higher education institutions.

ii. Establish the kind of support the higher education institutions provide to the student-mothers vis-à-vis what they actually need to complete their studies successfully.

Materials and Methods

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The study employed purposive sampling to select 16 student-mothers pursuing higher education studies in one public institution in Tanzania (Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2011) to participate in an in-depth exploratory study. The public university in Tanzania, from which the sample was drawn, has a vast and illustrious experience of providing higher education since the 1960s when many African countries were gaining their political independence. The involvement of a public Institution with such a long experience enabled the study to obtain relevant information on the support mechanisms availed to the student-mothers by the higher education institutions in a developing country's context.

Three major criteria were used to sample respondents to be involved in this study: being a mother and a student at the same time, having a child/children aged 0–2 years, being in second or third academic year of study. The study involved student mothers with children below two years because challenges to raise a child aged 0–2 years differ from children above two years as the former category of children require special attention in attending the child at home while the later can be enrolled in nursery or preschools to allow the mother attend studies. The study also involved second and third-year student-mothers as these had adequate experience to enable them to develop strategies required to ease and manage the challenges they experienced in their dual roles as mothers and student compared to the first year's students. This sample was robust enough to facilitate the exploration of strategies student-mothers deployed in parenting children too young to start pre-school. The background characteristics of respondents indicate that twelve out of sixteen were single parents and the remaining four were married. Furthermore, all the respondents resided off-campus, with most of renting a shared house where they shared electricity and water bills alongside other facilities such as washrooms and common kitchen. In line with university policy common in many African countries, they were aware of the non-provision of on-campus accommodation to parenting student-mothers.

Research Design and Data Analysis

This qualitative study employed a case study design to achieve its objectives. The case study design allowed the researchers to collect in-depth and detailed information on the coping mechanisms employed by student-mothers to manage higher education studies in Tanzania (Yin, 2014). In this regard, a semi-structured interview guide facilitated the collection of in-depth and detailed information related to coping mechanism student-mothers employ in higher education institutions and the kind of support they needed from higher education institutions for their effective coping. The interview guide did not only allow the researchers to remain focused during data collection but also to ask questions reflective of study's research objectives. In this undertaking, the researchers adhered to ethical issues guiding education research, for example, by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality for the respondents involved in this study. This aspect was achieved by giving respondents identity to work as pseudonyms: *SM 1 to SM 16* whereby *SM* stands for student-mother (Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2011).

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and record themes extracted from the respondents' responses. Two major criteria were used to arrive at themes and subthemes on coping strategies: frequencies of certain response on coping strategies uttered by the student-mothers, how related was the coping strategy to the research objectives and coping strategies described in the theories of coping (Ryan & Bernard, as cited in Bryman, 2016). Researchers also followed procedures and guidelines for qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2016; Yin, 2014). Deductive approach was employed to develop themes and subthemes where by Cognitive- Motivational Theory of coping (CMRT) was used to analyse the coping strategies revealed into problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping as proposed by Lazarus (1991).

Findings

Coping Strategies Employed by Student-Mothers in Higher Education Institutions

To begin with, the study explored coping mechanisms employed by student-mothers to manage the challenges experienced in higher education institutions. Under this objective, the results indicate diverse mechanisms that the student-mothers employed. Further analysis of the coping mechanisms signals that student-mothers employed more problem-focused coping strategies to manage the challenges coming their way: Part-time employment and running small or petty trades, developing appropriate study skills, proper selection of friends, effective utilisation of daytime, use of social support networks (support from friends through group discussion, getting support from a spouse or father of the child, from relatives, or from the university). Some student-mothers also reported the use of emotion-focused coping strategies in terms of moral and psychological support as well as encouragement from their loved ones.

Part Time Employment and Running Small/Petty Trades

Some student-mothers used two strategies to manage financial problems encountered in higher education institutions when performing their parenting-study dual roles. These strategies include engaging in part-time employment and starting small businesses. Those who opted for part-time employment reported that they would woke up early in the morning rush to work, and thereafter attend classes if that day had a class or go home to attend the child. One student-mother shared her experience thusly:

> To manage financial problem, I was employed by one food vendor commonly known in KiSwahili as 'Mama Ntilie'. I would wake up early in the morning to go and wash dishes, clean the place up and undertake other food eatery activities. It was not easy, especially when I had a class, so I would always come up with an excuse for not staying at work, I would rush to the university to attend class, and immediately after class I would again go to return continue with work (Interview, SM9, Single student-mother).

This statement suggests that student-mothers employed various strategies to ease their financial difficulties as they needed extra funds to pay for the added responsibility of parenting while studying including getting a part-time job in the informal sector. Although this job assisted student-mothers to earn out a living, it resulted in additional challenges of time management, especially managing time for parenting, studying, and work.

Some respondents managed financial barrier by engaging in small or petty businesses aimed to boost their otherwise poor financial situation as narrated by one respondent:

> Due to economic problem, I started selling perfumes. I advertised them on-line. Then for those who were interested, I would go and deliver the perfume at their homes. This trade helped me to get some money to cover basic expenses [compounded by childbearing] (Interview, SM13, Single student-mother).

Another respondent said that she "was selling shoes and hand-bags on a small scale but it was better than doing nothing" (Interview, SM15, Single student-mother). These two statements imply that student-mothers resorted to additional fund-raising sources to cope with financial difficulties they faced because of the added parental responsibility. In other words, they did not give up because of the discouraging circumstances and, instead, struggled to ensure that they complete their studies. The strategies used by student mothers implies individual efforts to manage financial constraints experienced. This suggest societal limitations to support parenting women in hardship situations and lack of financial support for student mothers in higher education.

Developing Appropriate Study Skills and Time Management

Some student-mothers had to adjust their study skills and reading styles in response to their changed situation of studying and parenting. The students had to develop their own time management to cope with University timetable because the University time table is inflexible to accommodate student-mothers and those with time tabling issues. This implies that timetabling challenges experienced by student-mothers emanate from higher education system limitations to respond to the diverse needs of students including student mothers. In this regards, those who used to study at midnight before they were mothers made necessary adjustments and focused more on the daytime as it was difficult for them to study at night with children equally demanding for their attention:

> To cope with the problem of time, I used to come to the college every day. Even when I had no session, I would go to the library the whole day to compensate for the time when I would not be at the university. I studied so hard that my GPA [Grade Point Average] was higher at 3.9 after having a child than in the first year before starting parenting when my GPA was 3.1 (Interview, SM 5, Married student-mother).

Similar experience was shared by another respondent:

> Due to poor study environment at home, I always utilised the daytime. I spent much of my time in the library for private studies. I do assignments at the campus during the day, and then at night when the child sleeps I use that chance for private studies (Interview, SM4, Married student-mother)

These two statements imply that, some student-mothers after realising that they had limited time to perform multiple roles developed strategies for managing their time by optimising effective use of daytime to compensate for the time they would use for child-rearing and other family duties. This strategy seems to be effective as it also seemed to improve academic performance, for example, raising GPA from 3.1 to 3.9. Time management also involved proper selection of friends and having a clear day-to-day timetable as the following statement illustrates:

> I cut off links with all lazy friends whom I had before and I remained with hardworking ones, who are serious with their studies, with whom I could spend the short time I had while on campus to study and share ideas and knowledge before going home where I could not study

because of the child needing my attention (Interview, SM 8, Single student-mother).

Another married student-mother shared the following testimony:

I try my level best to maintain my academic performance. I woke up early in the morning to prepare the child, and then rush to the university. Immediately after class, I would always rush home so that I do not have time for idle gossip or wasting with friends (Interview, SM1, Married student-mother).

It emerged in this study that 'lazy friends' or wayward pals could be associated with time mismanagement, which could prove costly to the student-mothers pressed for time and result in their academic underachievement. When university students interact with lazy friends, they could end up spending most of their time on non-academic activities. Implicitly, the study findings affirm that selection of friends is vital for time management not only to the student-mothers hard-pressed for time but also to other students at all levels of education and workplaces. Also, having a clear timetable of what a person would do after each activity helps one to keep time. Indeed, some student waste a lot of their precious time because they do not plan for what to do during the post-lecture hours.

Social Support Networks This strategy was employed to manage various challenges including financial constraints to cover tuition fees and higher accommodation expenses than they would incur in university halls of residence, taking care of the child, balancing time for parenting and studying. Social support networks mentioned in this study came from friends/peers, spouses, fathers of the children, parents and other relatives, and good Samaritans. However, the social support received was not originated from the society rather it was student-mothers themselves who sought for the support from close relatives and friends when their individual efforts were perceived to be ineffective to address the challenge. This suggest that from the level of the family to the society the responsibility of parenting the child belongs to the mothers to the large extent rather than the society at large.

Support from friends/peers: Another coping mechanism reported is the use of friends or peers. Friends came in handy when the student-mothers missed lectures, tests or examinations due to the limited time at their disposal. They used friends either to compensate for what they had missed during the lecture or during group discussion and, sometimes, they asked their friends to take care of their children while they attend lectures: "I relied much on group discussion, if I missed a class other will explain to me what they were taught, sometimes I would take notes

from friends if I missed a class". Another student mother said:

When I missed classes I had to make a follow up with my fellow students to get notes and others would explain to me some key issues that I had missed during the session by so doing I would catch up with my fellow students (Interview, SM 10, Single student mother).

The use of fellow students/friends appears crucial for the student-mothers to compensate for what they missed during lectures. This strategy was, however, found to be effective for those with strong ties with their fellow students. In other words, student-mothers are supposed to have social skills to make and maintain friendship. Indeed, some student-mothers used their friends to take care of their children: "Sometimes, I go with the child to the university hostel and ask my friends to help me take care of it while in class" (Interview, SM7, Single student mother). Friends also assisted student-mothers with study materials and notes whenever they missed classes: "When the child was still very young I was unable to attend classes, so I relied on my friends who gave me notes for private study. Later I had to discuss the notes with friends" (Interview, SM 11, Single student-mother). Some friends provided moral support to student-mothers: "My friend visits me every Wednesday. She is a law student at Tumaini University. She often counsels, encourages and gives me moral support to endure the challenges" (Interview, SM5, Married student mother). Friends/colleagues, it emerged in the study, rendered different kinds of support to student-mothers ranging from taking care the child, sharing lecture notes, moral, and providing psychological support as well as discussing key academic points with the student-mothers.

Support from spouses/partners: Eleven (11) student-mothers (68.8%) out of 16—both married and single—reported being supported by partners. Another five student-mothers (31.2%, $n = 16$) reported not being supported by the fathers of their children. Those who were supported shared their stories as follows: "The father of the child has been supportive in paying for food and accommodation; however, he does not provide much more support because he has no sustainable source of income (Interview, SM7, Single student-mother). Another respondent, this time a married student-parent, said: "My husband supports me by taking care of the child; he pays for accommodation and food (Interview, SM 1, Married). More support was reported by a married student-mother:

My husband supports me by taking care of the child… He also provides financial support in terms of accommodation, food and bus fare. He, sometimes, word processes my handwritten assignments and edits them. He

also counsels me on how to manage my roles as a mother and student. He assists me with house chores like washing baby clothes and others (Interview, SM 5, Married student mother).

These three statements imply that student-mothers, who receive support from their husbands or partners, tend to manage time for parenting and studies better than those who do not receive such support.

Support from relatives: Some relatives emerged to be supportive of the student-mothers in their double roles as students and parents. They reportedly provided moral, psychological, financial and material support. Most of the relatives supported student-mothers in taking care of children to free the mother to attend classes, particularly when they did not have a baby-sitter: "I was supported by different relatives: My own mother, my young sister and my mother-in-law to take care of the child while I attended classes" (Interview, SM 7, Single student-mother). A similar response was shared by a married woman: "My parents have no money but have been supportive morally and psychologically even at present I have now taken my child to my mummy" (Interview, SM1, Married). These statements from student-mothers attest to how they require both material and moral support to take care of the child and navigate effectively in their now changed course of their higher education studies complicated by the additional parenting role.

However, support from relatives depended much on whether student-mothers had disclosed their status of becoming a mother to their close relatives and whether these relatives were receptive to this changed situation, particularly when they were single parents. After all, some student-mothers, especially single mothers, feared disclosing to their relatives that they were mothers due to social stigma of having children before marriage. Consequently, they were unable to seek support from their relatives as their being student-mothers remained a closely guarded secret till an opportunity arose for telling the truth.

Use of Part-Time Babysitters Student-mothers also reported using part-time babysitters to manage challenges related to babysitters. They reported that, when student-mothers wanted to attend lectures, or sit for tests or examinations and happened not have full-time babysitters, relatives or a father/partner to attend to the child they sought the services of part-time babysitters:

The other mechanism is to hire a person to stay with my child whom I pay 3,000 TSh per hour. So, if I spend five

hours it means I would pay her 15,000TSh. Sometimes, however, when I have a test and carry my baby to that woman I would not find her. So, I would fail to attend the session as I had no one to leave the child with (Interview, SM 11, Single student mother).

Although the use of part-time babysitters helped student-mothers to cope with the challenge of balancing time for studies and parenting, the strategy also had cost-implications. As a result, those without the financial means failed to hire part-time babysitters.

Support from Higher Education Institutions Vis-à-Vis Actual Student-Mothers' Needs

For the second objective, the study sought to establish the kind of support the student-mothers needed relative to their actual institutional support. Thus the first sub-section focuses on the kind of support student-mothers receive from the university whereas the second deals with the institutional support they envisage to get from their institution.

Institutional Support Student-Parents Receive The kind of institutional support the student-mothers received was mainly of two types: From the dean of students' office and from course instructors.

Support from dean of students' office: This study established support mechanisms from the Dean of Students' office to student-mothers due to its centrality in handling students' welfare. The study found out that, 12 student-mothers did not receive any kind of support from dean's office. During interviews, one student mother said:

I have not received any support from the Dean of Students. I have never visited her office because I am scared to be asked very private questions such as 'Are you married?' For me, I think these are sensitive and irritating questions (Interview, SM 6, Single student mother).

Similarly, another respondent said:

I have not received any support from the Dean of Students. I remember she once called me to her office, but when I went there she told me to see her next time. Since then she has not called me. I do not know what she wanted to tell me (Interview, SM10, and Single student mother).

In the same vein, another respondent said: "I have not received any support from this university as a student-mother. I do not know whether there is any mechanism in place to support

student-mothers in this university" (Interview, SM8, Single student-mother). All these verbatim testimonies imply that student-mothers are perceived just as other students in higher education with no multiple or added roles. However, the fact that most student-mothers do not receive support they expected does not imply there is no consideration for them; instead, this state it might imply that some students lacked familiarity with the services offered at the university.

This lack of familiarity explains why a few student-mothers reported to have received support from the university through the same dean's office that the other had not. It was established that the dean's office collects information on pregnant and student-mothers with the purpose of supporting them when they were unable to sit for the examination because of the pregnancy or taking care of their children. In this regard, one respondent said: "The university supported me. I could not attend the University Examination; I was able to sit for special examinations" (Interview, SM7, Single). In other words, the dean of students' office facilitated the student-mothers making up for the missed examination just like other students who fell sick during the University Examination. All these students were eligible for university special examinations. Another respondent reported to have been supported financially by the dean's office:

> I had serious financial problems because I have no sponsorship and my parents are poor. When things were so tough I decided to see the Dean of Students, who started giving me money now and then. She then communicated my case to the Principal of [the College of] Humanities who managed to get a scholarship for me from a group of women assisting girls in hardship. They started supporting me when I was in the second year (Interview, SM3, Single student-mother).

These statements contradict the earlier ones on non-availability of aid from the dean of students' office to the student-mothers as they demonstrate that some do receive financial assistance from the same office. What lacks clarity is whether such financial assistance was budgeted for by the university or was just an ad hoc, impromptu gesture based on goodwill. As the university lacks a concrete plan let alone budget, the latter is a more logical explanation for the university under review than the former scenario.

Support from course instructors: The finding further revealed support provided by course instructors to student-mothers. Some respondents reported that some course instructors supported them in different ways: Providing moral support, guidance and counselling and academic support. Regarding academic support, one respondent said: *"I had support from course instructors when I missed tests or quizzes they were considerate and provided me with an opportunity to* do the tests at my convenient time (Interview, SM 11, Single student-mother). Another student-mother said:

> If it were not for my course instructor, I could have been discontinued from studies because I was not aware of any procedure after giving birth during University Examination. Moreover, I did not have money to pay the remaining tuition fee. Thanks be to God my course instructor settled the remaining tuition fees and I could sit for special University Examinations. She even looked for a place for me to stay and a person to take care of my child during examinations, because I don't have a baby assistant (Interview, SM 16, Single student-mother)

These statements indicate that some student-mothers received support from course instructors both financially and morally. On the other hand, single student-mothers risk discontinuation from higher education studies due to financial problems and challenges related to babysitters unlike married student-mothers with an existing support system. Moreover, some student-mothers were not familiar with university regulations, especially on issues pertaining to examinations.

Support Student-Mothers Need from Higher Education Institutions

Regarding what student-mothers needed from the university to complete their studies successfully, three major issues emerged: Special hostels for student-mothers, guidance and counselling services and treating them as students with unique needs as opposed to regular male students and women without children aged 0–2 years.

Special Hostels for Student-Mothers Regarding hostels, twelve student-mothers called for the establishment of special hostels for them near the campus. Student-mothers reported that after giving birth they look for accommodation out of the campus in the absence of an alternative on-campus or near the university. In fact, the off campus premises they rented were awfully expensive as compared to university hostels and were relatively far from the campus:

> There should be hostels set aside for student-mothers like those allocated for students with special education needs [disabilities] even one floor. This will enable us to attend to our children and participate in our studies comfortably, especially for those with children aged under two years (Interview, SM5, married student mother)

Similarly, one respondent said:

I suggest having hostels for student-mothers, which will help those who have no strong source of income to have affordable rent offered by the university, unlike at present whereby the off-campus rent is extremely high, one pays 50,000 TSH per month and above as compared to the university hostels whose costs range from 75,000/= to 110,800/= per semester [four months] depending on the location of the hostel (Interview, SM 12, Single student mother).

Another student-mother said:

I wish student-mothers could get accommodation within the university environment so that they would easily take care of their children while attending classes unlike the current situation when sometimes one is supposed to take a hired motorbike to rush to attend classes then back to take care of the child (Interview, SM14, Single student-mother)

These statement imply that student-mothers generally need accommodation within the University to balance their dual roles of parenting and studying. Due to the non-existence of accommodation within the university for student-mothers or near it, some of them end up board one or two public means of transportation to get to the university or use motorbikes, which are added costs to their already over-strained shoestring budget.

Guidance and Counselling Services Student-mothers also highlighted the need for guidance and counselling services to be provided for young girls who are direct from secondary schools. They reported that most single mothers unwittingly become pregnant due to the sudden freedom they enjoy at the university unlike in single-sex advanced secondary schools where they could not venture into sexual activities due to stringent school curbs coupled with parental controls while at home. Moreover, most single mothers were found to lack life skills to abstain and negotiate safely in relationships. Consequently, they engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse overlooking the risk of conceiving or even contracting sexually transmitted infections including the dreaded and still incurable HIV/AIDS. The following statement illuminate on this dilemma:

It is important to have special counselling for girls/women especially those who did not plan to have children while at the university. Some students become depressed. Others abort the baby because they often do not know whom to turn to for proper counselling once they find themselves pregnant (Interview, SM9, Single student mother).

Another student-mother said:

Student-mothers need counselling that can help them to manage multiple roles: Being a mother, being a student and a wife. So the university could provide psychological support on how to manage these delicate roles. Sometimes, the challenge comes from husbands, so counsellors could pay house visits to evaluate the environment where student-mothers stay. Counsellors could also counsel the husbands and other relatives on how to support their wives/relatives who are also students at universities (Interview, SM6, Married student-mother).

Since most student-mothers become mothers unprepared because of the largely unplanned nature of the conception, they tend to undergo stress when pregnant and some were not even ready to accept the child, thus opting for an abortion. Thus, guidance and counselling service would equip women in higher education studies with life skills to abstain or engage in safe sex to reduce cases of abortion and unwanted babies. Also, it would help those who find themselves pregnant to cope with the situation positively and manage their multiple roles as mothers, students and wives.

Institutional Treatment as Students with Unique Needs One striking finding from this stud has to do with some of the student-mothers pleading to be recognised and categorised as students with special needs. They argued that since students with special needs (disabilities) have their special unit that supports them academically and also shave recourse to special accommodation and personal assistants, the University could also accord special consideration to student-mothers who continue experiencing many challenges which could result in discontinuation if not well-managed. They need to have a special unit such as gender centre or dean's office where they could be registered and supported morally, materially and academically. Also, course instructors need to be informed about the presence of student-mothers/pregnant students in their courses for them to make appropriate considerations during assignments, group work and tests and avoid mistreating them unnecessarily:

Course instructors should have a special consideration to women pursuing higher education because they have unique needs that differ from those of men. Those who are mothers have multiple responsibilities that need special considerations some would wish to have psychological services (Interview, SM3, Single student mother).

Similar experience was shared by another participant who suggested: "There should be some mechanisms to identify student-mothers to be able to support them, for example,

during examinations when a child is sick or a mother has other problems which affect her studies… (Interview, SM4, Married). Another respondent said:

> Student mothers need special considerations. For example, if they have missed tests or quizzes due challenges related to parenting they should be considered without stigmatisation. Some course instructors are reluctant to provide student mothers with special tests or quizzes (Interview, SM14, Single student-mother).

Implicitly, course instructors need to be aware of the presence of student-mothers in their courses. In this regard, the students should inform their course instructors that they had young children. Alternatively, the findings suggest the dean's office compiling a list of student-mothers and circulating it to the respective colleges in the mould of current practice at the special education unit during tests and university examinations.

Discussion

The study findings indicate that student-mothers reported using the problem-focused coping more than they did emotion-focused coping to manage the challenges they experienced. The problem-focused coping employed include engaging in part-time jobs and small businesses to manage financial challenges, hiring part time babysitters and using friends/relatives to take care of the child while in class, engaging in private studies during daytime, interacting with hardworking students and severing links with lazy friends. These are all problem-focused coping strategies because they were directed towards addressing the actual problem rather than the outcome of the problem (Lazarus, 1993; Thompson et al., 2007). Impliedly, most of the challenges student-mothers experienced were perceived as controllable because, people do use problem-focused coping mechanism when they believe in their abilities to address the situation, and they have ample resources at their disposal to manage the situation (Kisanga, 2020).

Student-mothers also reported the use of emotional-focused coping. This strategy was highly reported by single student-mothers, especially when they faced a dilemma of accepting the responsibility of parenting a child single-handedly, or when they experienced a challenge they perceived as beyond their control. Similarly, Lazarus (1993) found that people use emotion-focused coping to deal with negative emotions rather than the actual problem. Other researchers (see, for example, Kisanga, 2020; Lazarus, 1991; Thompson et al., 2007) also found extensive use of social support networks as a coping mechanism.

The tendency of student-mothers to employ social support networks, especially support from partners and relatives compared to support from the university suggest either lack of such support mechanisms to support women after giving birth at the university, or the student-mothers were unaware of the kind of institutional support available to them. When student-mothers lack necessary support they can be discontinued from studies due to poor academic performance or drop out altogether even for difficulties for which they could get reprieve or make-up (Sawhil, 2006; Zahra et al., 2017). Zahra et al. (2017) found that about 70% of women in New York dropped out of college due to lack of family support and finance while they were pregnant. In similar vein, Sawhil (2006) pointed that student-mothers may opt to discontinue studies due to the inability of their partners to provide support, with the demanding and challenging mothering role forcing these unsupported parenting students to seek alternative means outside the education system.

Regarding the tendency of student-mothers to engage in small businesses and part-time jobs as coping strategy to manage financial constraints, Lyonette et al. (2015) found that student-mothers were more likely to seek part-time jobs to cover the adding up expenses than other non-parenting women. However, they ended spending longer hours doing paid work, which negatively affected their academic achievement due to time management challenges. Such a scenario suggests that employing coping mechanism, in turn, creates additional challenges to time management for student-mothers. The coping strategies revealed in this study focused on individual students' efforts to manage the challenges by seeking support from the society rather than societal/ education system established mechanisms to assist student-mothers overcoming the challenges experienced. This implies that challenges experienced by student-mothers in higher education institutions originate from the systemic factors rather than individual-student factors. The systemic factors include among others; perceiving the responsibility of parenting belonging to mothers and not the society at large consequently the society/ education system leave the burden of parenting to mothers. This is contrary to what Human Right declarations of 1948 proposed in article number 25 that "Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance…" This suggest that motherhood and child care should receive the priority it deserves from the level of the family to the society at large.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study indicates that student-mothers employ problem-focused coping more than they do emotion-focused coping strategies, implying that they largely perceive their challenges to be manageable (Lazarus, 1991; Kisanga, 2017, 2020).

Moreover, the study found social support networks to help student-mothers to cope with the rigours of higher education studies, particularly under the added responsibility of parenting while studying. Such support come from partners, husbands, relatives, friends, peers and the university through dean's office and, at times, from sympathetic and gender-sensitive course instructors. For student-mothers to complete their studies successful, higher education institutions are required to review its gender policy in order to accommodate unique needs of student-mother. In this regard, higher education institutions are recommended to do the following: Firstly, to establish affordable hostels within the universities to accommodate student-mothers, their children and baby sitters, which was currently unavailable as the university lacked a policy for rendering such support to parenting student-mothers. Secondly to establish caregiving centres to take care young children while their mothers are attending studies. Thirdly, to provide guidance and counselling service to the student-mothers to manage the multiple roles they have: Being a mother, a student and a wife (for some student mothers). Finally, to identify the needs of student mothers by registering them through gender centres or the dean's offices and treat them as among learners with unique needs that differ from those of male students and other women without children. Students mothers are advised to analyse the cost and benefit of being a mother and student at the same time and take appropriate decision without affecting their studies. Also they should perceive challenges related to parenting and studying as controllable to be able to cope successful and achieve their educational goals.

Declarations

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