



Managing the demands of higher education: Perspectives from student mothers at a university in Ghana

Dillis Appiah¹
Hinne Kusi²
Mark Quansah³

¹flavouri60@yahoo.com

²hkusi@uew.edu.gh

³mquansah@uew.edu.gh

^{1,2,3}University of Education, Ghana

Recommended Reference: Appiah, D., Kusi, H., & Quansah, M. (2026). Managing the demands of higher education: Perspectives from student mothers at a university in Ghana. *African Quarterly Social Science Review*, 3(1), 289–305. <https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.3.1.25>

ABSTRACT

The study explored pressures student mothers go through and their coping strategies as they navigate the dual roles of motherhood and academic life within a Ghanaian university. Pivoted on the ideals of role theory and guided by the interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative case study design to gain in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. With a population of student mothers within a faculty of the university, a census sampling technique was used to sample nine (9) participants. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide, which permitted participants to recount stories in their own voices. Using thematic analysis as the main analytical procedure, the study revealed, among others, that student mothers faced challenges such as time management difficulties and exhaustion, emotional and psychological strain, financial constraints, and institutional and structural deficiencies that limited their ability to effectively balance academic and parenting responsibilities. In the face of these challenges, student mothers employed various coping strategies such as adaptive time management and study patterns, participation in study groups and support networks, reliance on family and community support, and the use of emotional and spiritual coping mechanisms. The study concludes that while student mothers demonstrate resilience in managing multiple demands, their reliance on personal and informal support systems exposes the weaknesses in institutional support within the university context. The findings advocate the need for higher education institutions to adopt more inclusive policies and practices that recognize the unique challenges faced by student mothers.

Keywords: Coping Strategies, Qualitative Study, Role Theory, Student Mothers, Tertiary Education

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a global recognition of the importance of female education, yet many women face substantial challenges when pursuing higher education. Among them, the situation of student mothers has been very precarious over the years as they have had to balance the competing demands of academic life and childcare responsibilities. Studies point to a reality where student mothers constitute a growing demographic in higher education. For example, Dundar (2024) observed that a significant number of United States' college student populations are parents. Relying on the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data, he said, nearly one in five undergraduate students (18 percent) are raising children while enrolled. That amounted to 3.14 million individuals who were going through postsecondary education to change their own futures as well as shape the future of their families. Noll et al. (2017), had stated that in the United States, about 22% of all undergraduate students are parents, and of these, 70% are mothers (Noll et al., 2017). Brown and Nichols (2013) found that pregnant and parenting students constitute one of the most vulnerable populations in higher education, as they often lack adequate institutional support.

In universities across the globe especially in African, student mothers are balancing the dual roles of mothers and students with its associated challenges. Anibijuwon and Esimai (2020) identified that majority of the student mothers faced financial, childcare and academic challenges. The challenges are diverse, therefore calling for diversified survival strategies. While some opt for emotion-focused coping strategies, others prefer problem-focused coping strategies such as 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 (Kisanga & Matiba, 2023). In their efforts to manage the challenges through these strategies, Kisanga and Matiba indicated that, they sometimes rather compound the problem and worsen their situation. Sheila (2018) stated that the inability of student mothers in coping with the demands of

motherhood responsibilities coupled with academic demands brings about stress, poor health of student mothers, which negatively impacts their social and academic needs. All these factors contribute to poor performance, and delayed completion rates of student mothers (Sheila, 2018). Adofo (2013) had observed that a number of student mothers were lagging behind in access and participation in education because of the enormity of the challenges they face and how they strive to cope. In Ghana, the trend is increasingly evident, particularly with the expansion of distance and sandwich programmes that allow more women, including mothers, to access tertiary education (Dankyi et al., 2019). However, this expansion in student mothers on campuses has brought about visible challenges, such as the need for childcare spaces on campuses, flexible scheduling, and financial aid mechanisms directed to their circumstances.

Generally, studies on student mothers highlight recurring themes of time management difficulties, financial constraints, lack of childcare, and the experience of role conflict as they combine academic responsibilities with parenting (Hinton-Smith et al. 2018; Morandet & Wainwright, 2010). These challenges often translate into lower retention and completion rates compared to their peers. Morandet and Wainwright (2010) and Dasig (2020) emphasized that time, finances, and childcare remain the most critical barriers, while Anane et al. (2021) outlined the psychological and emotional burdens faced by student mothers in Ghana, who often sacrifice personal well-being to meet their dual responsibilities. Other studies, however, tend to focus on broad overviews of challenges faced by student mothers, with limited attention to how these students are coping with the challenges (Baluyos & Alvarico, 2024; Moore-Smith, 2024; Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Across many higher education institutions, student mothers continue to encounter significant barriers that compromise their academic participation and success. Universities are often designed with the assumption of the “traditional student,” one without major caregiving responsibilities, which creates systemic gaps in addressing the needs of students who combine academic work with parenthood (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Kanana et al. (2021)’s study discovered that 92% of student mothers faced time management difficulty with respect to lecture attendance, co-curricular activities, childcare responsibilities, and domestic chores, academic trips, taking the child to clinic, assignments submission, academic group discussions and academic trainings. Nevertheless, they found also that 96% of the student mothers received family support to meet day to day expenses while learning. What is of much concern is whether the support was enough in insulating the student mothers from the challenges of balancing motherhood and academic life.

It must be admitted that this topic has received much attention in the literature justifying the importance of the issue to scholars and institutions. It is an issue which needs constant monitoring to provide an accurate picture of how student mothers are faring in their dual roles on campuses. In view of this, this study, therefore, seeks to build upon and extend existing scholarship by focusing on the unique challenges and coping strategies of student mothers a faculty in the selected Ghanaian university. In achieving this, two questions have been posed to guide the study: (i) What challenges are faced with student mothers in combining motherhood and academic responsibilities in the Ghanaian University? (ii) How do student mothers manage the pressures associated with the mixture of motherhood and academic life in the Ghanaian University?

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding the global emphasis on the value of female education, a substantial number of females experience numerous challenges in their pursuit of higher education. Worthy to mention is the situation of student mothers in tertiary institutions. In various universities, especially in Africa and Ghana in particular, student mothers have had to balance the competing demands of academic life and childcare responsibilities. In the United States, about 22% of all undergraduate students are parents, and of these, 70% are mothers (Noll et al., 2017). Similarly, Brown and Nichols (2013) found that pregnant and parenting students represent one of the most vulnerable populations in higher education, as they often lack adequate institutional support. In Ghana, the trend is increasingly evident, particularly with the expansion of distance and sandwich programmes that allow more women, including mothers, to access tertiary education (Dankyi et al., 2019). The rise in student mothers has brought about visible challenges, such as the need for childcare spaces on campuses, flexible scheduling, and financial aid mechanisms tailored to their circumstances. Student mothers are equally people with “special needs” at least for the period within which they stay on the campuses for their studies. Yet, in most cases, they are left to their own fate on the various campuses.

Additionally, the absence of dedicated resources, including childcare facilities, financial aid programs, and flexible academic policies, hinders their holistic development and academic success. Inadequate support intensifies challenges such as time management difficulties, financial strain, and societal stigmatization, ultimately limiting their ability to integrate fully into the academic environment. The increasing enrolment of nursing mothers has further highlighted this problem. Observations at the study setting in November 2023 revealed that some lecturers and invigilators were compelled to babysit for student mothers during examinations to reduce their burden. The situation has not changed now. Similarly, student mothers were often seen with babies and caregivers on campus in search of safe spaces to breastfeed or rest. Informal interactions with student mothers confirmed that they face significant struggles in

caring for their babies while fulfilling their academic obligations. These challenges have clearly been accentuated by studies such as Dankyi et al. (2019 and Anane et al. (2021). Dankyi et al. (2019), in their mixed-method study of student mothers at the University of Cape Coast, which found that many struggled with fatigue, irregular lecture attendance, and the absence of lactating rooms. Anane et al. (2021) further observed that student mothers encounter multiple social, academic, psychological, and financial difficulties, often experiencing role conflict in trying to meet both academic and mothering responsibilities. By situating this problem within both global and Ghanaian contexts, the study addresses gaps in the literature regarding an evaluation of the coping strategies employed by the student mothers.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To explore the challenges faced by student mothers in combining motherhood and academic responsibilities in the Ghanaian University.
- ii. To explain how student mothers manage the pressures associated with the mixture of motherhood and academic life in the Ghanaian University.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was underpinned by the role theory. The basic tenets of the Role theory has been developed over the years by a number of scholars (Mead, 1934; Linton, 1936; Parsons, 1951; Merton, 1957). These scholars have contributed to the development of the basic concepts and frameworks that have fashioned role theory into a comprehensive approach to explaining social behaviour and interactions within various contexts. Role theories began to take shape in the 1950s and became very popular in management research around the 1960s. Fundamentally, Role theory examines how individual behavior is shaped by prevailing social roles and provide insights into how behavior is understood by others in relation to such roles (Anglin et al, 2022). Role theory operates under the key assumption that individuals have various roles that they play in daily life (Biddle, 1986). These roles affect how the individual behaves and sees himself/herself and how the individual's behavior is perceived by others. Thus, an individual's behavior can be understood and predicted if one knows the roles occupied and the corresponding behavioral expectations tied to that role (Anglin et al, 2022).

Associated with the role theory is the idea of conflict. Goode (1960) stated that role conflict arises when individuals experience competing demands and pressures from different roles they occupy. In the case of student mothers, the demands of education, such as attending lectures, completing assignments, and participating in extracurricular activities conflict with the responsibilities of parenting, such as childcare, caring for children, and managing household tasks. This conflict can be intensified by institutional expectations and societal norms regarding both roles, creating additional stress and pressure for student mothers.

Moreover, role strain, which refers to the stress and tension experienced when individuals make the effort to meet the demands of a single role, can also be prevalent among student mothers. Balancing the responsibilities of parenthood and academic pursuits can be emotionally and physically demanding, leading to feelings of exhaustion, and burnout (Sieber, 1974). Role theory adopted for this study therefore provides the pathway for a better understanding of the multiple roles individuals occupy and the expectations associated with each role. This is useful for analyzing how student mothers balance their dual roles as students and parents. Again, it would also assist in predicting potential conflicts and stress that emanate from role conflict, which are common issues for student mothers. That said, the theory would offer insights into how role expectations influence behaviour, which can be valuable for developing support programs that address specific role-related challenges in other institutions.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Challenges faced by Student Mothers

Balancing the demands of higher education with the responsibilities of motherhood presents a formidable challenge for many women pursuing academic degrees. While higher education offers opportunities for personal and professional advancement, student mothers often encounter unique obstacles that can hinder their academic success. This review critically examines the challenges faced by student mothers in higher education, drawing on existing literature to elucidate the complexities of their experiences. These challenges are, financial strain and economic pressures, limited access to support services, time management and work – life balance, academic challenges, and difficulty in maintaining consistency.

As indicated above, one of the primary challenges confronting student mothers is the financial strain associated with pursuing higher education while supporting a family. According to a study by Gerrard & Roberts (2006), student mothers often struggle to cover the costs of tuition, textbooks, and childcare expenses, which can result in financial



hardship and increased stress. Additionally, student mothers may face limited access to financial aid and scholarships, further exacerbating their financial difficulties (Daniel & Madugu, 2023; Febrianto, 2021).

Furthermore, access to support services such as childcare facilities, academic counselling, is essential for the success of student mothers in higher education. However, studies indicate that many institutions lack adequate resources to meet the needs of student mothers (Dillon & Jessica, 2023; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Sallee et al. 2023). For example, a survey conducted by Dillon and Jessica (2023) found that only a small percentage of colleges and universities offer on-campus childcare options, forcing student mothers to seek alternative arrangements that may be costly or unreliable. Furthermore, a survey by McMillen (2022), many student mothers report feeling overwhelmed by the lack of support and guidance from academic advisors, which can hinder their ability to navigate complex academic requirements and procedures.

In addition, juggling the demands of coursework, parenting, and household responsibilities requires exceptional time management skills and a delicate balance between competing priorities. Student mothers often find themselves stretched as they attempt to fulfill their academic obligations while meeting the needs of their families (Mordi et al., 2023; Israel et al., 2017). A qualitative study by Thomas (2023) revealed that student mothers frequently experience feelings of guilt and self-doubt as they struggle to allocate time and energy effectively between their roles as students and mothers. Research by Opit et al. (2020) indicates that student mothers often struggle to allocate sufficient time for studying and coursework amidst childcare duties and household chores. The demanding academic workload further exacerbates this challenge, leaving student mothers with limited time and energy to devote to their studies (Opit et al., 2020).

Moreover, the pursuit of higher education while balancing the responsibilities of motherhood presents a myriad of academic challenges for student mothers. From managing coursework to navigating institutional barriers, these individuals often encounter obstacles that can impact their academic performance and overall success (Lynch, 2017). Institutional policies and support systems frequently fail to address the unique needs of student mothers, leading to increased stress and difficulty in maintaining academic commitments (Kruvelis et al., 2017).

Finally, consistency is crucial for academic success, yet student mothers often face interruptions and disruptions to their studies due to family responsibilities. A study by Daniel and Madugu (2023) found that student mothers frequently encounter difficulties in maintaining consistent attendance and participation in classes, as they may need to prioritize childcare or attend to family emergencies. These disruptions can impede their progress and contribute to feelings of frustration and inadequacy.

2.2.2 Coping Strategies Employed by Student Mothers

The survival of student mothers on various campuses depends to a large extent on their ability to devise strategies managing the pressures associated with efforts to combine motherhood responsibilities with academic work. In the literature are strategies such as time management and prioritization, seeking social support, utilizing flexible learning options, leveraging institutional resources and support services, self-care and prioritizing well-being.

Effective time management emerges as a cornerstone for student mothers in higher education. Research by Garingan (2023) emphasizes the importance of prioritizing tasks and allocating time efficiently to balance coursework, parental duties, and personal commitments. By employing strategies such as creating structured schedules and setting realistic goals, student mothers can optimize their time and maximize productivity in both realms (Wekullo & Isna, 2020; Garingan, 2023).

Additionally, building a supportive network of peers, family members, and community resources is essential for student mothers navigating the challenges of higher education. Studies by Anane et al. (2021) emphasize the significance of seeking social support to mitigate feelings of isolation and stress. Engaging with fellow student mothers through support groups or online forums fosters a sense of companionship and validation, empowering student mothers to navigate academic and maternal responsibilities more effectively (Grassetti, 2013; Miyata, 2002).

Furthermore, embracing flexible learning options, such as online courses or evening classes, enables student mothers to accommodate their academic pursuits within the constraints of their caregiving responsibilities. Research highlights the value of flexible learning arrangements in facilitating access to higher education for student mothers (Cuming et al., 2023). By capitalizing on flexible scheduling and remote learning opportunities, student mothers can overcome logistical barriers and pursue their educational goals more seamlessly.

Moreover, accessing institutional resources and support services is instrumental in facilitating the academic success of student mothers. A study by Sallee et al. (2023) stresses the importance of leveraging childcare facilities, academic advising, and financial assistance programs offered by colleges and universities. By capitalizing on these resources, student mothers can alleviate financial strain, receive academic guidance, and access childcare options that accommodate their scheduling needs.

Moreso, prioritizing self-care and well-being is paramount for student mothers navigating the demands of higher education and motherhood. Research by Creasman (2022) emphasizes the importance of self-care practices such as



exercise, mindfulness, and seeking professional counselling support. By prioritizing their physical and mental health, student mothers can mitigate burnout, enhance resilience, and sustain their academic pursuits over the long term.

In conclusion, student mothers employ a diverse array of strategies to navigate the challenges of higher education while fulfilling their maternal responsibilities. From effective time management and seeking social support to leveraging flexible learning options and prioritizing self-care, these strategies enable student mothers to thrive academically and personally. By recognizing and supporting the resourcefulness of student mothers, institutions can foster a more inclusive and supportive higher education environment that empowers student mothers to achieve their academic aspirations.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

The study was underpinned by the interpretivist philosophical position, a paradigm that emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings and experiences individuals attach to their realities. It is based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed and can only be understood from the perspective of those who experience it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In line with the interpretivist paradigm, the study followed the qualitative approach of enquiry. The interpretivist paradigm and the qualitative approach enabled a deeper understanding of the context-specific issues relating to experiences of student mothers and their coping strategies in Ghanaian universities and Africa in general. The qualitative approach required a choice of a qualitative design thereby settling on case study as a design for the study. Yin (2018) described case study design as a qualitative research procedure that involves an in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context. He further emphasized the suitability of case study in terms of its ability to address the "how" and "why" research questions within complex social contexts. Case study is particularly advantageous for studying phenomena that are deeply influenced by the social, institutional, and cultural contexts in which they occur (Stake & Visse, 2025). It enables the researcher to uncover notes, patterns, and relationships that might not be evident through broader quantitative methods. Given the relatively limited literature on the experiences of student mothers in Ghanaian universities, the case study design is well-suited for exploring the various dimensions of the challenges of student mothers and their coping strategies. It provides a foundation for understanding this under-researched area and generating insights that could inform future studies and policy development (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population for this study comprises all student mothers enrolled in a faculty in the chosen Ghanaian University. Due to the absence of a centralized record of student mothers, the researchers engaged with the department presidents and course representatives to identify the 45 student mothers within the selected faculty. This population includes both undergraduate and graduate students who navigate the dual responsibilities of academic commitments and childcare. The subjects of this study were student mothers enrolled in various programs within the faculty. These participants are characterized by their dual roles as students and mothers, often balancing academic demands with childcare responsibilities.

In terms of sampling, a snowball sampling technique was employed to select a sample of nine (9) student mothers for this study. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where existing study participants recruit future participants from their networks. This method is particularly useful when studying hard-to-reach or hidden populations, such as marginalized groups or individuals with specific characteristics (Naderifar et al., 2017). It begins with a small group of initial participants, known as "seeds," who refer others, creating a chain-like recruitment process. While it is cost-effective and efficient, it may introduce selection bias since participants are likely to recommend individuals with similar traits. Despite its limitations, snowball sampling remains a valuable tool for qualitative and exploratory research. Additionally, the choice of nine (9) as the sample size aligns with Bernard (2013) who estimated a minimum of six (6) participants for a qualitative study. A sample size of nine (9) could be adequate especially when the sample is homogeneous (Bekele & Ago, 2022), like student mothers in the same faculty.

3.3 Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview guide was chosen as the primary research instrument. A semi-structured interview guide is characterized by a predetermined set of open-ended questions, allowing for both standardized responses and the flexibility to probe deeper into participants' answers (Bryman, 2016). The interview guide was divided into two main sections. The first section, Section A: Demographics, aimed to gather background information about the participants. It included questions that focused on the personal and academic details of the respondents, such as their age, academic level, and employment status. This demographic information was crucial for providing context to the responses and understanding how various factors may influence the challenges faced by student mothers. The second section, Section B: Thematic Questions Based on Research Objectives, contained questions structured around the two



research objectives. Each objective had five corresponding questions. The choice of a semi-structured interview guide was guided by the belief that, unlike structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews allow for follow-up questions and clarification, leading to richer and more detailed data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

3.6 Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining formal access to the chosen faculty, the data collection process continued with a pilot test, which was essential for refining the interview guide and ensuring that the questions were clear, relevant, and capable of eliciting comprehensive responses (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The pilot test was done on three (3) participants in a faculty other than the one chosen for the actual study. After the pilot test, potential participants were identified and contacted, and a convenient time and location for the interviews were agreed upon. To accommodate participants' preferences, interviews were conducted both face-to-face and, on the phone (Novick, 2008). Face-to-face interviews took place in a quiet, private setting within the university to maintain a confidential environment. Phone interviews also ensured privacy and flexibility for participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent to guarantee the accuracy of data capture and facilitate precise transcription (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes, a duration considered sufficient to engage participants meaningfully without imposing undue time constraints. The entire data collection process spanned six working days and one weekend, which was necessary to accommodate the availability of participants upon pre-informing them.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis was employed as the method of data analysis, as it is effective for identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurring patterns or themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher followed a systematic six-phase process to ensure rigor and depth. These phases included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This iterative process enabled the exploration of key experiences and challenges faced by student mothers in the faculty. In familiarizing ourselves with data, listened to the audio a number of times and then the transcription followed manually ensuring that participants' voices were accurately captured (Oliver et al., 2005). Transcriptions were carefully reviewed against the recordings to ensure accuracy, with personal identifiers removed to maintain confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data cleaning followed, involving correction of errors, removal of repetitions, and organizing the transcripts into meaningful sections aligned with the research objectives (Bryman, 2016).

The coding and theme development process was also conducted manually. The researchers engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the content, highlighting meaningful phrases and assigning codes to relevant data segments. Codes were iteratively refined and grouped into categories, from which broader themes were developed. These themes were validated against the raw data to ensure coherence and relevance to the research questions. Overlapping themes were merged, and representative quotes were selected to give voice to the participants. The final themes were then integrated into a narrative that directly addressed the research questions, ensuring that findings were both credible and firmly grounded in participants' lived experiences.

3.8 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research encompasses credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility strategies employed in this study were member checking, peer debriefing and prolonged engagement through the 20-30 minutes interview duration. For example, member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review their transcripts within a week of the interviews. This process provided them with the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of their responses and clarify any misinterpretations (Birt et al., 2016). Peer debriefing was done as the researchers consulted with academic colleagues to discuss coding decisions and thematic development, which helped reduce researchers' bias and encouraged alternative interpretations (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability was addressed through rigorous documentation and transparent processes. The research design, interview protocols, transcription methods, and analytic procedures were carefully described to ensure auditability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of a semi-structured interview guide contributed to dependability as the open-ended nature of the interviews allowed for deeper exploration of individual experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). Confirmability was ensured in this study through the use of an audit trail, which served as a critical tool for maintaining transparency and rigor. An audit trail involves systematically documenting the research process, particularly the decisions and steps taken during data analysis. For example, it includes detailed records of coding procedures, thematic development, and decisions made in response to emerging patterns in the data. This comprehensive documentation allows external reviewers or peers to trace the research steps and verify that the findings were grounded in the data rather than shaped by researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was ensured through the use of thick description, detailed



description of data collection and analysis, and use of participants' quotations. These enable readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, which explores the experiences of student mothers navigating academic and parenting responsibilities. To uphold ethical standards, informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Each participant was thoroughly briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, ensuring they understood their rights, including the option to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Additionally, confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process by anonymizing participants' data, which included using pseudonyms and removing identifiable information from transcripts. Audio recordings of the interviews were securely stored in password-protected files to prevent unauthorized access, thus safeguarding participants' privacy (Creswell, 2013).

3.10 Researcher Positionality

The researchers (DA, HK and MQ) acknowledge their positions as pseudo-insider and outsiders to the community of student mothers as well as empathetic observers who value the experiences of these students' mothers. At the time of data collection, first researcher, DA was a graduate student and this makes her a pseudo-insider. As a student, she was privy to some of the experiences and challenges of these students but because she was not a mother, she lacked an empathetic understanding of the experiences of these students' mothers. Second (HK) and third (MQ) authors were outsiders. At the time of data collection, they were lecturers in the selected faculty. Being males and lecturers placed them outside the circle of students and mothers. In all, the stated positionality of the authors demonstrates their inability to be biased in the data collection and analysis processes.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Response Rate

The demands of academia often present substantial challenges for student mothers, who must combine their academic obligations, such as coursework, exams, and assignments, with the responsibilities of caring for their children and managing household duties. This section delves into the unique challenges these student mothers face and the strategies they employ to navigate these dual roles based on the student mothers' responses. The section is organised around the two research questions that underpinned the study. Four sub-themes were derived in relation to the first research question. Six sub-themes were also derived from data gathered on research question two. The themes are presented with verbatim texts as evidence of the discussions that follow. The discussions are done in the light of existing literature related to the themes.

4.1.1 What challenges are faced with student mothers in combining motherhood and academic responsibilities in the Ghanaian University?

The four sub-themes derived under research question one are: Time Management and Exhaustion, Emotional and Psychological Strain, Financial Strain, and Institutional and Structural Deficiencies. These are discussed below:

Theme 1: Time Management and Exhaustion

A dominant challenge reported by student mothers at the Ghanaian University is the struggle to balance academic and domestic responsibilities, resulting in significant time management issues and exhaustion. The data reveal a recurring theme where many student mothers find it exceedingly difficult to balance their coursework with the extensive demands of childcare and household chores, often leaving them with little time or energy for academic pursuits. This challenge resonates with the finding of Dankyi, et al. (2019) highlighting the struggles of distance education student mothers in combining face-to-face lectures and parenting responsibilities in Ghana.

The experiences of respondent 1 picture the overwhelming nature of this dual responsibility. She said: *"Balancing my academic responsibilities with caring for my children is incredibly challenging. Between cooking, school drop-offs, and house chores, I have little time or energy left for studying, which has led to constant tiredness"* (SM1).

She continued:

"The financial strain of living far from school adds to the pressure. Travel costs force me to take on part-time work, leaving even less time for my studies and increasing stress. This combination of time constraints and financial difficulties makes it hard to keep up with both my academic and personal responsibilities" (SM1)



The statements from Student Respondent 1, managing children's needs while attending lectures and doing house chores leaves no time for learning. Financial strain due to living far from school reflects a multifaceted challenge that many student mothers face in balancing their academic and personal lives. The texts outline two key issues: the intense time constraints caused by domestic and childcare responsibilities, and the financial pressures exacerbated by living far from the university. Both factors significantly hinder the ability to dedicate time and energy to academic pursuits, creating an environment where academic engagement is not just difficult but nearly impossible.

The first issue emphasized the physical and emotional toll that domestic responsibilities place on student mothers. This constant fight between academic obligations and childcare duties is not only time-consuming but mentally exhausting. Research in the field supports this notion, with studies revealing that student mothers are often overburdened by household chores and childcare responsibilities (Bojuwoye, 2002). For these mothers, their day often begins early in the morning and ends late at night, with little opportunity for rest or academic focus. This leaves little room for the kind of sustained academic engagement that is necessary for success in higher education. In addition to the time constraints posed by domestic responsibilities, the financial strain mentioned adds another layer of complexity to the issue. Living far from campus creates additional travel costs, which often forces student mothers to seek part-time employment or engage in other income-generating activities. This financial pressure not only drains the energy and time available for academic work but also contributes to heightened stress and anxiety. The link between financial strain and academic performance has been well documented in the literature, with studies showing that students who face financial difficulties often experience higher levels of stress, lower academic achievement, and reduced engagement in campus life (Mahdavi et al., 2023). For student mothers, this stress is compounded by their need to balance work, academic responsibilities, and childcare duties, creating a situation where they are continually caught in a cycle of exhaustion and financial strain.

Even more, the issue of financial strain is not limited to travel costs; it also spines to the broader financial challenges of raising children while pursuing higher education. As noted in the study by Fatima et al. (2025), many student mothers are forced to balance their academic work with employment, which further impairs the lack of time to study. This financial strain often leads to increased fatigue, as student mothers must struggle through the demands of work, childcare, and academic responsibilities. These external pressures further impede their ability to focus on academic tasks and contribute to an overall sense of burnout. According to Miranda (2020), the financial instability faced by student mothers can significantly impact their mental health, leading to heightened stress and anxiety, which in turn reduces their ability to concentrate on academic tasks. A similar sentiment is expressed by respondent 3, who discusses the physical toll of balancing academic and domestic life:

"The constant challenge of managing time between academic duties and household chores leaves me drained and stretched thin. Every day feels like a race against time, often forcing me to sacrifice one responsibility for the other" (SM3).

The responses reflect the significant challenges that student mothers face in managing the dual responsibilities of academics and home life. As Rabbi and Islam (2024) highlight, the mental toll of balancing these responsibilities can lead to chronic stress, which impairs cognitive functions and academic performance. The time management struggles further intensify this issue. According to Nisa et al. (2024), effective time management is crucial for academic success; however, for student mothers, the pressures of home life often undermine their ability to allocate sufficient time for academic tasks. This results in disrupted study schedules, fragmented learning experiences, and, ultimately, lower academic achievement. As Moen and Sweet (2018) argue, the imbalance between academic and domestic demands can perpetuate a cycle of stress and underperformance, diminishing student mothers' potential for academic success.

The cumulative data from these respondents present a consistent picture of the competing demands that student mothers face. The balancing act of managing household chores, childcare, and academic responsibilities leaves student mothers exhausted and with little room to effectively manage their time or engage in their studies. This not only diminishes their academic performance but also undermines their ability to participate fully in the educational experience. These findings resonate with the broader literature on the challenges faced by student mothers. Fatima et al. (2025) emphasize the systemic nature of these challenges, which prevent student mothers from fully succeeding in both their academic and familial roles. Without targeted institutional support to address these burdens, student mothers are left in a position where exhaustion becomes the norm, inhibiting both their academic progress and overall well-being.

Given the pervasive nature of these challenges, addressing time management issues among student mothers requires more than just recognizing the problem; it requires holistic institutional interventions. Universities should consider providing both financial and emotional support, alongside practical solutions such as on-campus childcare services, flexible study hours, and academic accommodations. These measures would ease some of the burdens faced by student mothers, allowing them to engage more fully with their academic work, reduce their stress levels, and achieve greater academic success. Thus, addressing the time management issues of student mothers is not merely an academic concern but an essential step toward fostering an equitable and supportive educational environment for all students

Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Strain

The emotional and psychological strain experienced by student mothers at the University, is a significant factor that worsens the challenges of balancing motherhood and academic responsibilities. Participants provided insights into the emotional toll that this dual role has on their well-being and academic progress. Student Respondent 6 stated:

“After my husband’s death, I faced immense emotional stress and even considered dropping out of school. On top of that, my child’s health issues severely impacted both my financial situation and academic performance” (SM6).

This response highlights the emotional burden of dealing with grief, the responsibility of single-handedly caring for a child, and the additional pressure of academic commitments. The death of a spouse significantly impacts a mother’s ability to focus on her studies, contributing to overwhelming emotional strain. The respondent’s contemplation of dropping out of school illustrates how personal loss, compounded by the demands of academic life, can drive student mothers to the brink of academic withdrawal. Research by Roberts et al. (2018) identifies such emotional challenges as common among student mothers, noting that anxiety, depression, and stress often emerge when student mothers lack sufficient emotional or institutional support.

Student Respondent 2 indicated:

“I’ve struggled to balance my education and motherhood, constantly dealing with a lack of rest and emotional challenges, especially when my child is sick. On top of that, financial difficulties have made things even harder” (SM 2).

This respondent emphasized the emotional difficulty of managing a sick child while attempting to keep up with academic responsibilities. The demands of motherhood are intensified when a child falls ill, and this leaves the mother not only physically exhausted but also emotionally drained. The respondent’s challenges reflect a broader pattern of stress among student mothers who struggle to find a balance between caring for their children and keeping up with schoolwork. Studies have shown that mothers often feel torn between their parental and academic roles, leading to feelings of guilt and inadequacy, which further heighten their emotional strain (Fatima et al. 2025). This emotional struggle often leads to poor academic performance, as the mental energy needed for studying is drained by the emotional toll of caregiving (Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

The reference to financial difficulties further intensifies the emotional burden, as financial insecurity adds an extra layer of stress. As Miller and Smith (2020) suggest, the interplay of financial and emotional challenges is particularly acute for student mothers, who often face the dual stressors of providing for their children and maintaining their academic progress. Emotional and psychological challenges among student mothers are deeply interconnected with the physical demands of motherhood and the academic pressures of university life. The narratives shared by respondents reveal that emotional strain often stems from the inability to adequately meet the expectations of both roles. For instance, Student Respondent 6’s situation shows that the emotional toll of grief and caregiving often leads to academic disengagement. Similarly, Student Respondent 2’s difficulty in managing a sick child and academic deadlines reflects the broader theme of emotional distress caused by conflicting priorities, which is a major barrier to their academic success.

Theme 3: Financial Strain

One of the most prominent challenges faced by student mothers at the University, is financial strain. This issue surfaces repeatedly in the responses in previous themes, as it severely impacts the ability of student mothers to balance their academic responsibilities with the demands of motherhood. Financial hardship not only affects their day-to-day living but also extends to their academic performance, often leading to stress, diminished focus, and potential dropout.

Respondent 1 highlights the burden of living far from the school campus, which incurs significant transportation costs. The financial outlay for commuting daily, tied with general living expenses, creates substantial stress. For student mothers who are already grappling with limited financial resources, these recurring costs pose a formidable challenge. The situation is compounded by the responsibilities of caring for children, as Respondent 1 explains:

“I am constantly struggling with the high cost of living far from the school. The transportation fees are unbearable, and I don’t have enough money for textbooks or other essentials. I have to pay for almost everything when I come to campus, which drains me financially because things are very expensive here” (SM1)

Respondent 1’s experience sheds light on a critical and pervasive issue faced by student mothers: the financial burden of living far from campus. The high transportation costs mentioned reflect more than just a monetary strain. They symbolize a barrier to equitable access to education. For student mothers, these expenses are not merely inconvenient; they compound the challenges of managing academic responsibilities with childcare and domestic tasks. The inability to afford essential academic materials, such as textbooks, further amplifies the disadvantage. This material deprivation diminishes their ability to engage effectively with their studies, creating a gap in academic preparation compared to peers who do not face such barriers. Coupled with the physical and emotional toll of managing household



duties and childcare, these financial pressures drain cognitive resources, making it harder for student mothers to concentrate or perform academically.

Similarly, Respondent 2 shares how the financial strain is impaired by children's healthcare costs. She recounts the difficulty of balancing academic work with the emotional and financial challenges of having a sick child. Medical expenses, as well as the need to attend to her child's health, not only drain financial resources but also limit the time available for studying. This dual challenge, where both financial and emotional pressures converge, forces student mothers like Respondent 2 into difficult decisions about how to allocate their time and resources. The impact on academic performance is inevitable, as financial concerns consistently detract from the focus on studies as Respondent 1 explains:

"Most times, I can barely afford to pay for my child's healthcare. When my child is sick, I have to leave school early or miss lectures to attend to them. The financial burden of paying for medications, combined with the lack of financial support, makes it almost impossible to focus on my studies" (SM2)

In Respondent 4's case, the financial strain is linked to the cost of her child's education. She mentioned the difficulty of covering school fees for her children while managing her academic expenses, such as books and materials. Respondent 4 explains:

"The financial strain worsens due to the cost of school fees for my child, which makes it hard to balance everything. I often have to prioritize their education over my own" (SM4).

This reflects how financial stress is not a singular challenge but one that intersects with other facets of the student mothers' lives, creating a compounding effect that impedes both their academic and personal lives. Miller and Smith (2020)'s research, emphasizes that the financial burdens placed on student mothers often lead to academic underperformance or even dropout, as the weight of coping with education and motherhood becomes unsustainable without adequate financial support. The decision to work extra jobs or sacrifice study time is common among student mothers who are struggling financially, a trend that is evident in the experiences of the respondents at the University. Brooks (2013) highlights this phenomenon, documenting how financial strain can force student mothers into making trade-offs between their academic commitments and financial survival. For instance, Respondents 1, 2, and 4 illustrate how financial difficulties lead to diminished time for study and an increased focus on managing household expenses and childcare costs. Brooks' research supports the notion that financial challenges not only reduce the time available for academic work but also create significant psychological stress, which further hampers academic success.

Theme 4: Institutional and Structural Deficiencies

The most pressing concern raised by the respondents is the glaring lack of institutional support for student mothers at the University. This absence of formalized structures to assist these student mothers has created an environment where they are forced to navigate their academic pursuits while managing the responsibilities of motherhood, often without the necessary institutional resources to support them. A respondent revealed that the university does not provide student mothers with adequate support systems, forcing them to bring their children to class. She said:

"Unfortunately, the university does not provide us with enough support as students. We often have no choice but to bring our children to class because there aren't any options for childcare or flexible support systems that would allow us to manage both our academic and parental responsibilities effectively" (SM6)

This does not only disrupt the mothers' ability to focus and engage fully in lectures, but it also presents challenges for the other students and faculty. The mere presence of children in the lecture hall can divert the attention of the mothers, as they need to split their focus between caring for their children and keeping up with the lecture. This is not an isolated problem, as similar challenges have been documented in studies on non-traditional students, particularly mothers who struggle to juggle their dual roles without institutional support (Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

The respondent further highlighted this institutional gap by confirming that the university lacks adequate childcare facilities, not only for students but for staff as well. This points to a broader structural issue within the institution, as student mothers and staff members with children are left to manage these responsibilities without access to a reliable support system. The respondent's statement stresses that the university has not taken sufficient steps to create a more inclusive academic environment for student mothers. She stated;

"The university has done little to create an inclusive environment for student mothers. We're left to manage on our own, with no support systems for our needs. Truly speaking, I feel like we're invisible to the University. No childcare facilities, no flexible schedules, it's as if they don't expect mothers to pursue education" (SM6)

Despite the presence of a student center, which could potentially serve as a space for childcare, the facility remains underutilized or non-existent, leaving student mothers to fend for themselves. This scenario forces many

mothers to bring their children to lectures, placing additional emotional and psychological burdens on them as they struggle to maintain their academic commitments while attending to their children's needs.

The absence of support systems such as daycare facilities, flexible scheduling, or even dedicated study spaces for student mothers leaves these women in a vulnerable position. Moreau and Kerner (2015) argue that such institutional neglect is reflective of a broader issue within higher education, where non-traditional students, particularly student mothers, are often marginalized or overlooked in terms of resource allocation. This systemic oversight results in a lack of institutional policies that could ease the burden on student mothers, such as affordable on-campus daycare, flexible lecture schedules, or even the provision of financial assistance to help with childcare costs.

As a result, student mothers are forced to travel through an academic environment that is not designed to accommodate their unique needs. They are left with no choice but to manage on their own, bringing their children to class and coping with the additional strain that this imposes on their academic performance. Without a formal support system, these women face greater challenges in maintaining their academic standing, often leading to increased stress, fatigue, and, in some cases, academic failure.

The responses highlight a critical gap in the university's provision for student mothers, one that urgently needs to be addressed. The institution's inability to provide adequate support structures perpetuates an environment of exclusion for student mothers, who are left to balance the demands of education and motherhood without the resources that could significantly improve their experiences and outcomes. This calls for the need for systemic reforms in higher education institutions to accommodate non-traditional students, ensuring that student mothers are not left to struggle in isolation but are provided with the tools and support they need to thrive academically and personally.

In summary, the qualitative responses illustrate that student mothers at the University, face considerable difficulties in managing the dual responsibilities of academia and motherhood. These challenges include time management issues, emotional stress, financial strain, and a notable lack of institutional support, all of which significantly impact their academic success. Many student mothers struggle to find sufficient time to balance coursework with child-rearing duties, while financial constraints and emotional burdens, such as stress and exhaustion, further complicate their academic journey. The absence of childcare facilities and flexible academic schedules intensify these problems. This situation mirrors the findings in global studies on student mothers, which also highlight similar struggles. To address these challenges, institutions must implement reforms, such as providing on-campus childcare services, financial aid, and a more adaptable academic structure, to meet the specific needs of student mothers and enhance their chances of academic success.

4.1.2 How do Student Mothers Manage the Pressures Associated with the Mixture of Motherhood and Academic Life in the Ghanaian University?

The fact that student mothers are experiencing stressful academic journey stemming from their dual roles in the university has been strongly emphasised in the preceding paragraphs. The findings on the challenges facing student mothers set the pace for a thorough discussion on how these non-traditional students are coping. Directed by the second research question, four sub-themes were derived: Time Management and Study Patterns, Study Groups and Support Networks, and Leveraging Family and Community Support. Emotional and Spiritual Coping Mechanisms. These are discussed below:

Theme 1: Time Management and Study Patterns

A key theme among student mothers is the strategic use of time to accommodate both their academic and parental responsibilities. This group of students must often manage conflicting demands on their time, so identifying and maximizing quiet moments for studying becomes essential. A prominent pattern in their responses is the reliance on early morning or late-night study sessions when children are asleep or engaged in other activities. These are periods where distractions are minimized, allowing mothers to focus intensely on their academic work. Student Mother 1, for example, stated,

"I study at midnight or dawn because it's the only quiet time I have after managing chores, lectures, and my child's needs during the day. Despite being exhausted, I push through to keep up with my academics, though it's often difficult to focus and retain information" (SM1)

This Indicates that the quiet hour before the family wakes up provides her with the most uninterrupted time for coursework. Similarly, Student Mother 4 reported,

"I often find myself staying up late at night to study because the days are completely packed with activities. It's exhausting, but it's the only quiet time I get to focus on my academic work. Even then, the lack of sleep catches up with me, and I sometimes struggle to keep my eyes open while studying. It feels like I'm always playing catch-up, never fully able to dedicate the time I need to my studies" (SM4)

This text stresses the early hours as an ideal time to engage with academic work without the constant interruption of childcare duties. It highlights the mothers' intentional adjustment of their schedules to create undisturbed time for intellectual engagement. This proactive time management is reflective of effective strategies that help balance the dual demands of motherhood and education (Hochschild, 2012). This method of studying during non-peak hours demonstrates their adaptation to the realities of their lives as caregivers. Early mornings and late nights, typically quieter in a household with young children, allow these student mothers to maximize productivity while ensuring they still fulfill their family obligations during the day. By sacrificing sleep and leisure during these times, they prioritize their academic work without neglecting their children.

Student Mother 3, however, introduced a slightly different dimension to the time management approach. She noted:

"I start my day as early as 4:30 a.m. to take care of household chores and get time for short-term studies" (SM3).

This emphasizes the mother's ability to combine household responsibilities with academic tasks. Despite the early wake-up time and the physical exhaustion from both parenting and housework, she continues to push through and study. This strategy exemplifies a level of perseverance and resilience that is essential for student mothers who cannot afford to put off either of their primary roles. The act of pushing through tiredness to complete both domestic duties and academic tasks reflects a deep sense of responsibility and determination. As Roberts et al. (2018) suggest, resilience is a critical trait for student mothers who must continuously balance the competing pressures of caregiving and academic performance.

In addition, this approach reflects flexibility and a high level of discipline. The capacity to rise early, complete chores, and then transition to academic work requires an immense level of self-control and adaptability. Time becomes a limited resource, and these mothers skillfully divide it to maintain equilibrium between academic and family life. The choice to engage in academic tasks during the early morning reflects a keen awareness of when they are likely to be most effective in their studies.

In contrast to students without children, who may have greater flexibility in scheduling study time throughout the day, student mothers must seize these windows of opportunity whenever possible. This time management practice emphasized the broader literature on how women, especially mothers, manage the "second shift" of work at home (Hochschild, 2012). For student mothers, this second shift includes both household and academic responsibilities, making time management even more critical to their success. On top of that, these mothers' time management strategies are not only practical but also psychologically significant. By choosing to study at times when their children are less demanding, they create an environment where they can focus without the emotional strain of feeling like they are neglecting their children. This sense of control over time fosters a feeling of accomplishment and lowers stress, contributing to their overall academic performance. Time management, thus, plays a dual role: as a tool for academic success and as a coping mechanism that supports mental and emotional well-being.

Theme 2: Study Groups and Support Networks

In addition to solitary study routines, some student mothers incorporate social support strategies into their academic lives to enhance their academic performance and lessen the pressures of balancing coursework with their maternal responsibilities. One such approach is participation in study groups, where collaboration with peers offers not only academic support but also emotional and social reinforcement. For instance, Student Mother 1 shares;

I actively participate in study groups during exam periods, seeking both academic support and collaboration with peers. This strategy helps me balance my academic responsibilities with the demands of motherhood, enhancing my learning experience and keeping abreast with my missed lectures. (SM1)

Beyond facilitating a deeper understanding of course materials through collective learning, study groups enable student mothers to distribute the academic workload, making the overall demands more manageable. Study groups offer student mothers a structured form of peer support, which can significantly reduce the feelings of isolation that often come with trying to balance the roles of mother and student. According to Miller and Smith (2020), study groups are particularly beneficial for student mothers, as they create a community of learners who can empathize with one another's struggles. These groups provide an essential academic network where participants can share resources, clarify difficult concepts, and stay motivated during exam preparation. For mothers who might struggle to find time for consistent study due to household responsibilities, the accountability that comes with being part of a study group can also improve time management and focus.

The social connections formed in study groups extend beyond the academic sphere. They offer emotional support, helping student mothers cope with the stresses of balancing two demanding roles. As academic responsibilities can often feel overwhelming, particularly when coupled with the physical and emotional demands of motherhood, the ability to share one's challenges and successes with peers provides much-needed relief. By exchanging experiences and

advice, study group members foster a sense of community, which can buffer against the isolation and stress that student mothers frequently encounter (Miller & Smith, 2020).

In many ways, study groups function as informal support systems where student mothers gain not only academic insight but also emotional encouragement. These peer networks enable them to discuss common struggles such as managing time, overcoming fatigue, or coping with the pressure of deadlines, and to strategize ways to overcome these challenges. This kind of shared experience can be especially valuable when formal institutional support systems are lacking or insufficient. As research has shown, peer support networks are a critical component of success for students who face external pressures such as caregiving responsibilities (Roberts et al., 2018).

Moreover, study groups can help mitigate some of the unique challenges student mothers face, such as limited access to on-campus resources due to time constraints or childcare responsibilities. By participating in study groups, student mothers can stay connected with academic life without needing to be physically present on campus as often as their non-parenting peers. In this sense, study groups also function as a flexible resource, accommodating the needs of mothers who may not always have the freedom to attend office hours or extra tutoring sessions.

Theme 3: Leveraging Family and Community Support

Several student mothers rely on family members to ease some of their domestic responsibilities, which plays a critical role in enabling them to balance the dual demands of motherhood and academia. For example, Student Mother 5 outlined how her immediate family supports her, stating; “My mother helps manage household chores when she’s available, giving me the time and space to focus on my studies and attend classes without being overwhelmed by domestic responsibilities” (SM5). Student Mother 3 added:

My mother lives with me in my hostel. If I do not sleep for some hours after lectures, I would not be able to study in the night. Normally, after lectures, my mother takes care of my baby while I sleep. Sometimes my baby becomes very difficult to control, but my mother brings her years of experience in childcare to bear. No amount of temptation would force my mother to wake me up. This support from my mother has kept me going in my academic life as a mother (SM 3).

These examples highlight the practical and emotional importance of familial support in helping student mothers respond to their daily responsibilities. By offloading some of the household duties to trusted family members, these mothers can carve out more time to focus on their studies, thus improving their academic engagement and performance. Student Mother 4 relies more on the community:

I stay alone with my daughter at my rented apartment. Sometimes it becomes very difficult for me to attend lectures. Sometimes I leave my baby in the care of neighbours. There is a hair dresser with a number of apprentices nearby so sometimes I leave my baby behind and with the help of the apprentices, the lady takes care of my baby as I attend lectures. There is a lady who stays in a nearby apartment who sometimes also helps in a similar fashion (SM 4).

The reliance on family and trusted community members supports the Social Support Theory, which emphasizes the importance of external support systems in helping individuals manage stress and responsibilities (House, 1981). Social support, whether from family, friends, or community, acts as a buffer against the overwhelming pressures that can arise from managing multiple roles. For student mothers, family members often step in to provide much-needed relief by taking on childcare duties, assisting with household chores, or offering emotional encouragement. This network of support is vital not only for easing their workload but also for improving their mental well-being, as they can share the caregiving burden with others, reducing stress and exhaustion.

Research shows that the presence of supportive family members significantly contributes to a student mother’s ability to succeed in higher education. When family members are willing to assist with domestic duties or childcare, student mothers can concentrate more fully on their academic tasks, thus maintaining a healthier balance between their responsibilities (Roberts et al., 2018). Moreover, this form of support fosters a sense of security, allowing student mothers to know that their children are in safe hands, which in turn reduces anxiety and enables them to focus on their educational goals.

Theme 4: Emotional and Spiritual Coping Mechanisms

Balancing emotional well-being is another crucial aspect of these student mothers’ management strategies, as they respond to the challenges of both motherhood and academic responsibilities. The emotional strain of managing these two demanding roles can be overwhelming, making the cultivation of emotional resilience vital for their success. One way in which student mothers achieve this is through spiritual practices. Student Mother 3, for instance, highlights the use of spiritual tools to cope with stress, stating;

“I turn to prayer for emotional strength by joining online programs sometimes, as it helps me find peace, regain focus, and renew my energy amidst the challenges of balancing motherhood and academics. The presence of my mother alone gives me the assurance that am not alone in the struggle.

Sometimes when I am down, my mother steps in to encourage me and bring an issue that takes my mind off the struggles. It has been our practice to pray at dawn and this has really helped” (SM3)

This coping mechanism reflects the significance of spiritual and emotional support in helping these mothers manage their daily challenges. The role of spirituality in stress management is well-documented, with research showing that religious practices can provide individuals with a sense of control and comfort during difficult periods. Park (2005) argues that prayer and other spiritual activities offer individuals a way to interpret stressful situations in a more manageable way, fostering emotional stability. For student mothers, who face the pressures of academic deadlines, childcare, and household responsibilities, prayer can serve as a form of emotional release, helping them to regain focus and emotional balance when feeling overwhelmed.

Moreover, the use of spiritual practices allows student mothers to integrate their faith with their daily lives, giving them a sense of coherence between their roles as mothers and students. As spirituality provides them with a consistent source of emotional strength, it becomes an integral part of their holistic approach to balancing the competing demands of their lives (Park, 2005). This intersection between emotional resilience and spiritual practice illustrates how student mothers draw on internal and external resources to manage the pressures of their academic and maternal roles.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study examined how Ghanaian university student mothers manage the pressures of balancing parenthood with further education. The findings demonstrate that while student mothers have interconnected institutional, financial, emotional, and intellectual challenges, they also demonstrate resilience by using a range of coping strategies. Student mothers mostly rely on personal, family, and spiritual resources to cope with the demands of college life, although these coping strategies often compensate for a lack of institutional support. These emphasize the need for more inclusive university policies and support systems that acknowledge and address the unique challenges experienced by student mothers in Ghanaian higher education.

5.2 Recommendations

One of the biggest problems faced by student mothers is time limits. As a result, universities ought to host workshops on time management and productivity that are specifically suited to the needs of student mothers. These seminars might concentrate on useful tactics including setting priorities, efficient study methods, and striking a balance between work and home duties. Additionally, another weighty obstacle to student mothers' academic success is financial difficulty. Universities should collaborate with governmental and non-governmental organizations to create focused financial support mechanisms in order to address this. These might include child care grants, need-based scholarships, tuition subsidies, and flexible on-campus jobs that permit student mothers to work without sacrificing their attendance in class. Lastly, combining parenthood with school was found to be extremely stressful on an emotional and psychological level. Therefore, counselling and mental health services should be expanded by universities in order to offer student mothers specialized support.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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