



RESILIENCE OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT MOTHERS IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: *The purpose of this research paper is to offer insight into resilience in undergraduate student mothers and presents results of one of the objectives of a wider study. Unlike their counterparts who defer studies or drop out of university when they get babies, these resilient young undergraduates are able to handle schooling and motherhood effectively. The study focus is the development of resilience in these mothers who get to be mothers while studying and barely out of adolescence. Set in the constructivist paradigm, the basically qualitative research adopted the descriptive phenomenology design set in the Straussian tradition of research in lived experience. The theoretical framework included black feminist theory underlining feminist marginalization, grounded theory adopted in data collection and resilience theory that emerged in data collection and analysis. The study targeted undergraduate student mothers in the third year of study who had lived motherhood from first or second academic year and Deans of schools. The study was guided by objectives: To explore features of a day in the life of an undergraduate student mother in schooling and parenting; To identify factors that define the undergraduate student mother experience; To establish the sources of strengths and support for the undergraduate student mothers. Using in-depth face to face interviews with open ended questions in semi-structured interview schedules, a simple purposive sample of five undergraduate student mothers and four Deans of schools were interviewed. Oral recorded data was transcribed, coded and discussed under themes with verbatim quotes. Results indicated that the student mothers had developed resilience at various levels that enabled them prevail the challenges of the triple role. Coping strategies like acceptance of the baby and motherhood status, motivation to beat the odds and determination to prove their worth reflected emotional resilience while physical resilience in household chores, assignments, baby care and social responsibilities were well articulated. Skills in managing finances were also adopted. Support from family, friends and inner psyche were responsible for the development of resilience. The study recommends mentorship to develop resilience in undergraduate women to beat the odds, make informed choice or manage the triple role.*

Key words: Lived experience, Triple role, Resilience, Public Universities

1.1 Introduction

This paper presents findings of a research conducted in a public university in Kenya on the experience of undergraduate student mothers in the pursuit of higher education. One of the key objectives of the research whose

results are presented in this paper, sought to establish the sources of their resilience. The study, partially anchored in Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2014; Bryant, 2018) targeted the third year undergraduate student mothers who had gotten babies at their first or

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second year and hard persisted in their studies alongside motherhood, while many of their counterparts, unable to cope, deferred studies or dropped out of university. Though basically surrounding lived experience in the Straussian tradition, the study made room for in-depth interviews for some selected Deans of faculties for supplementary input into undergraduate student mother educational experience. This resilient group of student mothers is viewed as a unique experience in the Kenyan scenario of the post-secondary mass transition that sees majority of students join first year at university when barely out of adolescence. Motherhood therefore finds them when too young. The essence of the study was to gain insight into their lived experience as well as explore a local and global scenario of rising numbers of undergraduate student mothers faced with numerous challenges in the triple role of parenting and schooling. To a great extent, the literature review of the study was informed by scholarly work from Europe, America and Africa, where existing demographical statistics in universities reflect the number of undergraduate student mothers as being on a rapid increase and therefore a social phenomenon that is there to stay. Accumulated research such as that of the Institute for Women Policy Research (IWRP, 2016) in America and international student mother surveys by Clare Callender in Europe (Callender, 2015; Lyonnet, Artifield & Behle, 2015) contribute to the tracking of student mothers in the education experience. At the initial stages of the undergraduate student mother research, and as published in a paper; *Undergraduate Student Mothers and the Changing Social Phenomena*, a glimpse at the numbers of student mothers at undergraduate had indicated that they were increasing in numbers at university. Their challenges of motherhood were also associated with university drop out or delayed completion cases (Anaya, 2014; Shemjor, 2015; Chemjor, 2013).

In the Kenyan public universities, the undergraduate student mothers stand out as a unique category of student

mothers. They are different from the mature entry student mothers who might have superior skills in parenting for they tend to be older and have often well-coordinated education experience and family support. These undergraduate student mothers are further excluded from the high school student mother category that is covered by distinct education policies that spell out their reentry, accommodation, progression and completion. The age bracket at which undergraduates enter university constitutionally ranks them as adults but on getting babies and the triple role scenario, they may not have the requisite skills and resources to cope with parenting and schooling. Again, as the number of the Undergraduate student mothers grows, in Kenya, existing research unfortunately paints a bleak picture of these student mothers as faced with great challenges owing to the responsibilities and experiences that come with parenting and schooling. Incidentally, for the undergraduate student mothers in the Kenyan experience, motherhood for many occurred barely months after high school and only a short duration marks the high school - university transition. In fact, many of these undergraduates enter university at the age of 17 to 20 years and in the background of gained skills in parenting, attending boarding high schools implies long absence from the home environment hence little exposure to motherhood activities like baby care. Again, the vigorous and rigid education encounter, with compulsory and continuous schooling at high school, little time is left for other personal encounter with baby care amongst siblings. The situation is made worse by short school holiday sessions and the delegation of such baby care roles to house helps. This leaves no room for induction into non-academic skills like baby care activities that the home environment may avail. Worse still, such undergraduates are still heavily dependent on parental support emotionally, socially and financially, making a sudden plunge into motherhood quite alienating. This definitely implies great impact into their education participation and achievement.



1.2 Research Methodology

The study was pegged in the constructivist paradigm owing to the need to capture how the undergraduate mothers construct their world; how they view and understand the world around them. The study is basically qualitative and adopts the descriptive phenomenology research design. Though originating from psychological foundations of psychology, it is a popular research design in the social sciences in general. When developing it, Amedeo Giorgi, (2009) presented a two tier approach to data in researching social phenomena. There is the descriptive aspect that describes phenomena and the interpretive, adopted by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) that tends to interpret or create meaning, deductions or conclusions derived from phenomena. The descriptive approach that fits this research on lived experience was adopted by Edmond Husserl and aligned to the belief that it is acceptable for a researcher to suspend opinion through bracketing or other means and descriptively present the world as it is experienced by the research subject; ‘the knower’ in this case the student mother. The lived experience of the undergraduate student mother is seen through their narration of their life journeys of motherhood, a phenomenon that is similar to what Christensen, (2017) illustrates about lived experience. It is only them who know and can tell what they go through. The descriptive approach in this case highlights the typical characteristics of the lives of the individuals as an objective description of life as it presents itself in the young mothers’ lived experience. Being qualitative in nature, it makes use of qualitative methods recommended for qualitative designs; the oral interviews as advocated for by qualitative researchers (Ormiston, 2013; Fahad 2018; Creswell, 2014). Through the exercise of caution, bracketing was adopted during data collection with adherence to the performance of face to face oral interviews. Data was recorded on storage media and later coded and discussed under themes after verification processes.

1.3 Resilience and the Coping Phenomenon

In the study on the lived experience of undergraduate student mothers, resilience as a major theme emerged in the background of grounded theory methodological approach that was effective during data collection. Resilience emerged as the foundation upon which the undergraduate student mothers thrive as compared to their counterparts who do not cope and end up dropping out of the institution. Resilience as a term may be viewed as the degree of coping for an individual facing certain challenging situations. Originating from the American psychological association, the term resilience was used in social work to portray persistence against ‘adversity’ or what some researchers refer to as traumatizing experience (Van Breda, 2018; Garrett 2016). In the case of the USTMs, it could be seen as the determination to persist in education against the challenges of the triple role, the intrigues of motherhood and the missed opportunities in their pursuit of higher education. Whether it is viewed as beating ‘adversity’ in form of disability, trauma, or just vulnerability, resilience is generally, the ability to withstand. Whether borne of the individuals’ inner psyche or from the surrounding, or even from support from significant others, the end effect is the same; the individual does not crush under the negative force or the experience causing them pain, fatigue, frustration or disappointment. In the face of difficulties, an individual is viewed as standing firm against the oppressive forces; being resilient. That resilience is seen as a form of coping with difficulties and prevailing over challenges. The key word remains coping when focus is on resilience.

Coping can be associated with the individual qualities and strategies that enable one to handle challenges as though they were the norm. It may revolve around an individual’s inner psyche or cultivated motivation from their surroundings. This may be manifest in an individual’s attitude towards the source of the challenge that may be viewed as both obligatory and fateful and therefore



inevitable and so, acceptable. In this situation, the inevitability leads to the inner conviction that it shall be well with the individual since it cannot be avoided. Coping occurs often when challenges are internalized as an expected part of a normal life's design. In such circumstances as considered fateful like childbirth in an African setting, pain or suffering is seen as part and parcel of the motherhood experience. It is viewed as part of life when undertaking a challenging responsibility in motherhood or a phase in life related to it. Coping may be seen as laying the foundations of resilience where an activity is undertaken with great exercise of willpower, despite the pain it causes. As revealed by Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), coping is seen as dealing with a demand that exceeds one's resources like is the case with the undergraduate student mothers who face inadequacy in parenting skills, financial resources and time for parenting and schooling. As illustrated by Moghandam, (2017), coping may be associated with the efforts employed by a person both internally or externally to measure up to some social demands that in normal circumstances are way beyond their means. To get to such a point, it may require some psychological conviction that one is able. Such a conviction emerges from an individuals' view of a situation, whether they see it as an undue challenge (physical or mental) and therefore internalize the pain, or they see the painful process as rewarding and therefore bear the experience positively. Without coping, experience evokes pain even though the circumstances may apparently look harmless.

1.4 The Triple Role Challenge

During the study, resilience was identified as the major source of strength for the undergraduate student mothers' ability to manage the triple role. The term 'triple' emerges from the motherhood, the educational and the social engagement of the undergraduate young girl (Chemjor, 2015; Mahugu, 2014; Shemjor, 2015). The triple role scenario is brought out by Emily Beater in student

motherhood and schooling in The Guardian (2019)" when she presents a close to 'universal' experience of a student mother in higher education. She reflects on some desperate experience like breastfeeding while doing assignments sometimes at 5 am; a time when her counterparts would be still enjoying their sleep. She further clarifies that she is not alone in such experience both at Oxford University and elsewhere claiming that the intrigues of motherhood are same across the board. Rather than sit and fret over their marginality however, such undergraduate student mothers, she claims evoke the spirit that refuses to give in to human weakness like fatigue in baby care especially when working under pressure of academics. Such stoicism involves being positive in the face of oppressive and depressive experience in the triple role.

Coping with the triple role may require physical coping involving management of the domestic chores, and emotional coping that involves dealing with the challenges, frustrations and pain in the motherhood journey as an undergraduate. It may require the engagement brought out by Rowe, (2017), that may present prioritizing with regards to baby attention and studies without making any of them suffer negligence. As gathered from the five undergraduate student mothers, emotional coping was a first step in the motherhood journey for all the participants. Through face to face interviews, findings reflected that for the undergraduate student mother, the coming of a baby emerged as a double blessing. On one hand it came as a great challenge in the face of schooling but on the other hand it was a kind of social fulfilment. Socially, childbirth is seen as a blessing for it is not only a mark of fertility, but it is also a plus in the cultural obligations of childbirth in an African setting. The conviction that after all the baby is expected to come at one time or the other made the coming of the baby an acceptable occurrence for some of the mothers interviewed. It is this scenario that comes out in Doreen's



expression when the question of her feelings on the coming of the baby is posed to her:

Doreen: Ehh,mmm... it was not easy. The thought of a baby meant responsibility. Here I was, with nothing, but blessed with a baby... mind, you are still a student... [shakes the head] ... still expecting some money from home but you know now at the moment, you know that you will get a baby...you know, the responsibility and such... even though I informed my boyfriend and he took it positively as well, we know that we have an added responsibility for ourselves, obviously our parents will lose morale in helping us and it's like... they will just decide whether to keep helping us or... [a shrug of the shoulders] all in all, we decided to live [to stand up to the challenge]

Literally for all the participants, response to the initial news of the coming of the baby seemingly evoked moments of pain. The gestures; shrugging, clicking, shaking of the head with regret and consternation were observable common scenario as the undergraduate student mothers narrated their experience. Other features like facial expression of pain in scowling, lip biting, and fast blinking to bely tears all seemed to express the nostalgia and inner turmoil experienced at recalling and reliving such moments as they went through on discovering a baby was on the way. When further clarification was sought over such body language, it indicated a mixture of joy and pain as they tried to fathom the implications of the impending motherhood. This is an expression of the pain, the challenges, the threatening situations the student mothers go through on the coming of a baby and it is such experience that is seen forming the basis of resilience through coping, once the undergraduate mother overcomes them and decides to face the reality of motherhood and move on. A best case scenario is the case of Mercy when the question of her reaction on the initial news that a baby was on the way came up. She puts it thus;

Mercy: Of course I did not plan to have the baby [silence; pensively] ... it was a great shock. For the baby to come this early... [shakes head], I was not prepared. So the first time I realized I was expectant, I was shocked. I did not plan for it of course because of my studies., and... [hesitates]...aaah.... from there I had to think of a possible way out because I knew there is life after that. So I tho...ught... I decided I had to approach some of my friends to tell them so that I may hear from them. [Mmmh]They may tell me of possible solutions or what am going to do... I was... [shrugs] I was confused.... I went through sleepless nights thinking...worrying, at one time I even stopped attending class...I mean, it was unbearable. I was depressed.

This experience may be seen as an equivalent of Bandura's 'crack' that potentially threatens someone when in deep mental anguish or physical pain (Bandura, 1986). The thought of the impending baby care responsibility; financially socially and emotionally, is seen as the first distractor in academic engagement; a milestone. In the interviews, each undergraduate student mother recounted such hard moments of near depression, self-chastisement, sleepless nights, dozing off in class, mood swing, occasional irritability and regular skipping class due to fatigue. If it was mid-semester, this disruption meant impaired commitment to class work as in the case of Mercy and consequently poor grades. This is the kind of picture reflected by Rico, Sabet and Clough (2017) when they explore the experience of College mothers, unearthing great challenges.

Further revelation from the participants indicated painful experience emotionally as in how to break the news to parents, how they would manage an infant, how the friends would react, and how society would view them. There was also the biological experience of morning sickness, repulsion to certain foods and scents, emotional overflow



and fatigue. Such experience was reflected as bordering the ‘crack’ that Bandura, (1986) alludes to, for it threatens class attendance and attending to assignments from the lecturers as the student mothers revealed.

1.5 Coping Levels and Strategies

In the face of coping, it was interesting to note the change in attitude and body language when the participants began to narrate how they emerged from such predicament. Common to all was the inner conviction that the coming of a baby was a cultural expectation, the baby was a mark of blessings and motherhood was a natural law. Such inner conviction that comes in winning the internal battles and emotional turmoil reflect coping. It is the acceptance of destiny and the focus on the positive aspects of the presence of the coming baby that kept them going. However, such acceptance for some of them was not easy. Some were overwhelmed had at one time contemplated abortion but with time, the fear of socio-economic implications of abortion and possible hurt deterred them till the joy at childbirth overcame their fears. Generally, what they made out of the situation brings out their coping especially because all of them admitted that they pushed on with their classes despite the challenges. This is the case of resilience in the context of motherhood. It is that persistence and determination with which an individual handles various roles that are challenging during both the prenatal and post-natal period of motherhood.

Again, whether seen as an outcome or a process, as Masten (2015) puts it, resilience points at individualized context. Though seen in larger contexts like politics, to Masten, women tend to succumb to vulnerability especially when exposed to lengthy occurrence of oppressive phenomenon. She sees ‘gendered structures’ like the USTMs triple role with the baby care responsibility (mother and nanny) and schooling as weighing heavily upon student mothers.

With their numbers going up at university, it may imply that the scenario of undergraduate mothers at university may not be wished away. From the literature, developing

resilience in women is a global issue; probably better addressed in Europe and America than in the Kenyan situation. For instance, the Institute for Women Policy Research (IWPR) in America is a global establishment in networking and addressing issues of women especially student mothers through research, seeking to bring to focus issues affecting them and seeking solutions. It is this resilience that Kenyan researchers on student mothers recommend as necessary in the address of their plight in institutions (Mahugu, 2014; Shemjor, 2015; Chemjor 2015) Such initiatives as the IWPR engage research widely and are therefore in a position to make wise decisions regarding student mother issues. Basically, a glimpse of the exposed challenges facing the USTM in Kenya reflects such a grim picture that one is left wondering how they manage to remain in college. This however, is refuted by the enormous display of resilience from the response of these mothers during data collection. This is the situation one of the University Deans (Dean 4) alludes to when he claims that the USTM suffer in their own little world, some going without meals in order to keep her baby comfortable and manage to go to class. The USTM resilience can be seen as a micro process at the intra-personal level and an outcome that thrives in the background of higher education participation. As a process, resilience is seen as ‘mediating adversity’ as intervention at a personal level (Van Breda, 2018, Masten, 2015 & Blessinger, 2018). In the mediation of adversity, a number of factors are seen as responsible for the student mother persistence in education. Such mitigating factors emerge from the psyche while others are from social support; from individuals they associate with. Both sources tend to help the individuals to ‘rise above their circumstance (Van Breda, 2018)’; their challenges and difficulties. These are the factors that define them at university; factors that may not be wished away as Dean 3 and Dean 4 emphasized during the interview. An example of the resilience that emerges from the psyche are portrayed by one of the participants, Meg, who feels that



she needs to maintain herself on campus in order to spite the gossiping relatives who see her as a source of shame. This reflects social marginalization that associates premarital motherhood with loose morals. Meg has the internal drive as a source of strength in the triple role aimed at proofing wrong her tormentors. The pain of exclusion becomes her strength to move on. This is contrasted by Doreen's case where her friends offer positive appreciation and acceptance of her motherhood that acts as a positive trigger to her determination to struggle in the triple role to avoid disappointing those who support her. Doreen's case may reflect Amati's social capital where social relationships are seen as a resource in ones' wellbeing, providing support and friendship.

Though the term 'adversity' may sound almost harsh in the student mother circumstances; for missing an examination may not equal a devastating famine condition; the situation where the term was initially used; the implications of a missed examination in the education context may be as devastating. It may imply lots of costly readjustment of such a mother's life. Challenges like rejection, lack of support from parents, dropping out of courses mid-semester, fatigue, lack of enough sleep, stress from articulating the triple role and ill health are potential threat to education and career development. In the face of challenges, the undergraduate student mothers possess a formidable resilience in the form of personal attributes and a circle of social supportive relations. Other sources of resilience are seen as cultural dictates in that one has no choice but to take up responsibility as a task expected to come sooner or later in life. Resilience also emerges from social conformity where an individual seeks to put things right and conceal weakness. For instance, some of the mothers tend to work to survive in college to please those helping them. Resilience comes out as a stoic response attributed to a strong self-will to survive through their academic processes to completion.

Resilience from personal attributes emerges as well with strategizing and goal orientation in attendance to duty. The student mothers reveal this in their strategizing for success and prioritizing roles by attending to crucial baby care on arriving from college and pushing household chores to later schedules like late evening or early mornings. To fight fatigue, they concentrate on the joys of being a mother; having to be called mum sometimes. They also work hard as proof of inner drive like '*after all I can manage it all; student and mother*' alongside blending of identities of wife, mother and student and pushing to be seen as the perfect paragon. Doreen, Mercy and also Meg displayed such an inner drive, not intimidated by gossips, tedious economic engagement or lack of effective financial support and they moved on.

1.6 The Face of Resilience

The fact that the undergraduate student mothers thrive through the programme indicates successful coping over long periods of motherhood and studies. This scenario reflects an ambience of resilience that is manifest in their retention through the academic years. One of the coping mechanisms that emerged in their response is acceptance. Such could be coming from within the individual; a conviction that getting a baby is normal and an individual's responsibility, or it could come from outside, where friends and mentors accept the new scenario; the coming of a baby and therefore encourage them. It is such acceptance that comes out in Sagone (2016) illustrating how psychological resilience develops within an individual in the face of adversity. Kaboudi (2018) observes that resilience, be it created in certain contexts or innate in an individual, tends to determine coping through enhanced emotional wellbeing. In an enhanced background, coping often contributes positively to mental health. With coping, an individual develops an attitude that works against negative emotions and enhances acceptance. The dual direction of acceptance here may be discerned in Doreen's experience with both external and internal acceptance of the baby and



the positive effects it has not only on her, but also on the baby:

Doreen: now you know when you become a mother you have to accept it. Like if you had some friends with whom you used to joke so much with, you may decide to talk to them... okey you behave like a mother... and of course ... I should not hide that I am a mother and I should be proud of it. So when I am interacting with friends... I am like, let's go see my daughter, how she is... is like they'll come with me to my place, admire her... I'll just fit in the environment my friends will want me to be in. So we can go to the house, we can play with the baby, she feels nice when she has the friends.

To Doreen, the trick lies in one not keeping off old friends, it is not about them looking for you but it is about accommodating them in your motherhood experience; involving them, inviting them to share the baby experience, encourage them to participate in your activities. Doreen sounds a note of concern here, like the rejection announced by Mercy from her friends would likely be as a result of failed connections with them, the failure to bounce back (Harrison, 2013). This would be probably failure to connect, to inform them or invite them to share in the baby experience. It could be similar to Meg's case where she does not care to tell friends. Both Meg and Mum Andrian seem to present a picture where friends are aloof and unsupportive. According to Amati, (2018) Friendship thrives where there are social connections and lack of selflessness creates suspicion and withdrawal, avoiding those that give meaning to our lives, which with time may lead to mistrust, guilt and related malign to relationships. Doreen's acceptance by friends, her inviting them to her place evokes such joy as one that overflows even to the baby.

1.7 Conclusion

Education in Kenya is to a large extent guided by the principal of inclusivity in the face of marginalization. The

undergraduate Student mothers therefore emerge from a scenario of multiple marginality bringing out the various levels of exclusion that an individual may display in the context of social phenomena as compared to those in their social group or those who are like them. It may also highlight denied or compromised rights of an individual and the suppressed self-engagement or self-expression as illustrated by the lives of the undergraduate mothers with relation to their counterparts who do not have the triple role to contend with. For the USTM, the triple role is not considered normal as it clearly comes out of the findings. With emotional turmoil, physical over-exertion and lack of adequate rest are potential threats that can have the cracking effect on the undergraduate student mother schooling. This explains why education goals fall short of achievement when inclusiveness comes into focus. This highlights the purpose of coping to build a formidable resilience for such mothers in pursuit of their education. Coping is crucial with the coming of a baby. For some, it comes from inner convictions that it is part and parcel of life experiences. In the face of increased motherhood cases at undergraduate, those who drop out are many, an indication that they lack the coping strategies or the formidable personality that withstands the threat of adversity and gives way under the weight of challenges. It is also clear that coping begins with not just acceptance of situations but also innovating on how to emerge victorious or prevail over challenges. It is clear that coping begins by self-acceptance as a mother, and the self-conviction that for instance, the coming of a baby doesn't imply a divide between one and the friends who have no babies. It is a matter of moving through the stages of building resilience, a critical aspect of coping. Their focus on their strengths. For instance, Mercy saw a financial threat since she was from a poor background and started operating a piggy bank, saving coins for the baby's initial expenditure. This focus on her strength of saving evoked self-control and sacrifice to cut off luxury, skip weekend travelling and



avoid niceties, and she made it. Doreen saw loneliness and depressive circumstances and involved friends who filled her life with hope while Meg sensed the economic threat and compromise of her mother's health and stood strong in the triple role; milking cows and preparing the baby's meal before 7am before promptly leaving for campus. The question that may also arise is related to the support mechanisms at university. How much is being done to support such resilience in such mothers and how much of the coping strategies are exposed to those who get babies early.

1.8 Recommendations

While coping may naturally emerge from personality or be compelled by circumstances, for some, it may need direction, coaxing, alerting or coaching before they realize their potential. The self-acceptance scenario requires that an individual student mother is initiated into motherhood through mentorship, to expose them to the impact of the coming of the baby like acceptance. Such mentorship can lead to informed choices, mature decision making, better coping and a more meaningful living and educational experience. This may require an institution's concerted efforts in policies and as individuals in the rehabilitation, acceptance and accommodation of the undergraduate student mothers in order to achieve inclusive education opportunity.

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