



Balancing Motherhood and Higher Education: Challenges Faced by Student Mothers of Rajshahi University

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Abstract

Formal education is a key determinant of women's empowerment, yet student mothers often struggle to pursue higher education while fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities. This study explored the challenges experienced by student mothers at Rajshahi University in Bangladesh as they balanced their academic and maternal roles. A descriptive cross-sectional design was employed, and structured questionnaires were administered to 104 married student mothers. The findings revealed that most participants experienced unplanned pregnancies and reported substantial academic, caregiving, and psychosocial difficulties. A majority struggled to attend classes regularly, study consistently, or achieve expected academic results. Student mothers also reported challenges such as emotional abuse, difficulty caring for their children, mental stress, guilt, and criticism from teachers and classmates for being mothers during their studies. These challenges collectively hinder their academic progress and well-being. The study highlights the need for inclusive policies that support student mothers, including flexible academic arrangements, improved institutional support systems, and family-friendly practices within higher education.

Keywords: Student mothers, Higher education, Academic challenges, Caregiving responsibilities, Bangladesh, Women's empowerment, Institutional support

Introduction

Formal education is regarded as one of the most crucial instruments for empowering women, as it affects many aspects of their lives [1, 2]. Needless to emphasize, education for women is also essential to the process of development [3]; thus, it is increasingly seen by policymakers and academics as a necessary indicator of the advancement of society and the country. Indeed, without acknowledging the potential role of women, nothing of permanent significance can be accomplished [4].

Education is a basic human right; so, everyone must have the chance for self-development through education. However, the presence of student mothers, regardless of their situation, distinguishes them from other students. Student mothers constitute the most significant

and fastest-growing demographic among higher education institutions globally since 1966 [5, 6]. As a student mother, she juggles the responsibilities of parenting and academic pursuits. The convergence of these two positions is a formidable challenge due to the extensive duties imposed on these students. Student mothers encounter several obstacles in their pursuit of education [6]. Considering the importance of women in development, the existing research, however limited, has significantly contributed to elucidating the challenges encountered by student mothers in different countries. Given that, investigations into student mothers in higher education in Bangladesh are even rarer. Therefore, the present research sought to investigate the challenges student mothers face in balancing their responsibilities as students and caregivers pursuing higher education in Bangladesh.

Motivation for women's higher education and advancement of gender equality

Global literacy rates among adult males are significantly higher than those among adult females. Despite educational advancements for both genders, the gender gap persists [7]. Education improves labor market productivity and income growth universally; nevertheless, women's education yields benefits for social well-being that are not necessarily quantifiable by market metrics. Elevated educational attainment enhances women's household productivity, thereby contributing to improved family health, higher child survival rates, and greater investment in children's human capital. The societal benefits of women's education include stimulating economic development, enhancing average life expectancy, and improving the effectiveness of political processes [8].

The participation of women in higher education is a crucial element for achieving development goals in all societies. Therefore, the significance of female education has been the subject of extensive research. Previous studies demonstrated numerous potential benefits of women education, such as reducing the fertility rate [9-11] and increasing the labor force participation rate [4, 12, 13], to ensure gender equality [14], improve child health [15], and adverse effect on infant mortality [16]. All these factors significantly motivated the government and other development practitioners to advance women's

education. Moreover, a woman with an education will raise her children well. A decent and educated society will therefore emerge. For this reason, it's stated that a woman's education benefits her entire family, whereas a man's education benefits him alone [17, 18]. In addition to contributing to a more skilled labor force and higher household incomes, educated women will also experience greater social mobility [19]. Women become more aware of the standard of living and quality of life and reduce feelings of insecurity as a result of education [20]. Therefore, the UN, the World Bank, and other international development organizations encourage women's education because it contributes to human capital. Furthermore, according to the capacities approach, education is considered as a force that gives women expanded choices [21].

Moreover, education is crucial to empowering women and closing the gender gap. It can lessen gender-based disparities and change the legacy of disadvantage that women have historically suffered [22]. Thus, Bangladesh has mainly focused on girls' education to equip women to enter the workforce and to prepare females for enlightened parenthood [22]. According to BANBEIS [23], students who completed part of the secondary and higher secondary examinations throughout the past five years had a nearly equal ratio of male to female students. However, only 40.41% of female students are in public universities, 30.64% in private universities, and a total of 37.58% at the university level. Although education is a fundamental human right, women's higher education needs greater attention in developing nations like Bangladesh [19].

Challenges faced by student mothers and their effect on them

A growing number of scholars argue that student-mothers encounter daily challenges, significant effort, ongoing stress, and a unique sense of distinction compared to full-time students due to the intricate dual responsibilities of being both learners and caregivers [7]. Caplan and Caplan [24] note a coincidence between women's biological clocks and the academic tenure clock. Women are obligated to combine their pursuit of higher education with childbearing due to their reproductive duties. As a result, student mothers are becoming increasingly common at our higher education institutions. Student mothers have faced numerous challenges as a result of this situation, since higher education institutions lack resources such as lactation rooms. On the contrary, the student mothers may find it difficult to leave the child at home due to additional obstacles in their home environment. Thus, a student mother involves balancing parenting responsibilities with academic obligations simultaneously. Given the amount of responsibility on young students, it is a complex undertaking for them to integrate.

Studies have also highlighted the tension many women face in balancing their roles as both mothers and students. Egenti and Omoruyi [25] and Dankyi, Dankyi et al. [26] claim that because of the stress and trauma they experience, they are psychologically, emotionally, and physically disposed against the educational program. Although the exact percentage of student mothers who drop out is uncertain, retention is a significant issue [27]. Additional difficulties include providing care for their children and rs, the ents' inabilitinabilitya degree from the university, and feeliand Moreover, "no child in lecture hall" restrictions, financial strains, awkward lecture times, and the difficulties of balancing a young child and being a student [28]. Moreover, the observed consequences of juggling the multiple responsibilities of being a student and a mother encompass school or university dropout, inadequate parenting, and strained relationships with one's own parents, friends, and family.

Prior to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, numerous obstacles stood in the way of women's education. Early marriage, pregnancy, and then becoming a mother were the obstacles that prevented most female students from completing their studies. However, nowadays, a woman may gladly accept the dual roles of motherhood and

education, even under the best of circumstances; carrying out these two roles can drive a person in different directions [29]. For student mothers, the challenge is to balance being a mother and a student without sacrificing either pursuit. Moreover, the traditional roles of motherhood may be impacted if a student mother prioritizes her academics over other responsibilities [30].

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the role conflict theory. According to Wolf, as referenced in Adofo (2013), role conflict theory explains the sociological idea of a person having to meet conflicting expectations from multiple social roles. This causes stress and tension since meeting one role gets in the way of meeting another. It can further cause severe burnout and problems with mental health, impair performance at home or in professional life, and in personal relationships. He further identified two types of role conflict: intra-role conflict, which concerns conflicting demands within a single role, and inter-role conflict, which involves competing expectations from different roles held by the same individual. This research is based on the inter-role conflict aspect, which indicates that a student-mother's responsibilities as a mother may sometimes clash with her commitments as a student.

Present study

Over the last several decades, the number of student mothers has emerged as the most rapidly expanding demographic within higher education institutions globally [5]. However, Bangladesh is not an exception to that. Scholars argued that society and the education system present numerous systemic challenges for student-mothers in developing countries, especially those with children, whether explicitly or implicitly [31]. Studies in this regard in the context of Bangladesh are very limited. Thus, this present study aims to identify the challenges in terms of academics and childcare issues of student mothers who combine the worlds of family and academic pursuits. Hence, this study is among the few that specifically target student mothers in the university education system in Bangladesh.

Therefore, the study aimed to explore the challenges experienced by the student mothers in managing their dual roles as students and caregivers. This study further aimed to address the following specific objectives:

- To explore the challenges faced during pregnancy;
- To know the challenges faced by the student mothers as caregivers;
- To identify the challenges faced by the student mothers as students;

This study also aims to address the following specific research questions:

- What challenges do married female students encounter during their pregnancy?
- What problems did student mothers experience as caregivers?
- What obstacles did student mothers encounter in their academic pursuits?

Data and Methods

Study design

The study was descriptive in nature. The purpose of this research is to investigate the challenges faced by student mothers in fulfilling their dual roles: first, as caregivers, and second, in pursuing their education. A cross-sectional study approach was followed to investigate the objectives of the study.

Participants and Procedure

A total of 104 student mothers from different departments of the University of Rajshahi were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. A purposive sampling procedure was employed to

recruit participants because it enabled researchers to select respondents with specific and appropriate attributes for the study. The inclusion criteria of the participants of this study were i) female married students and ii) who were raising children while pursuing their higher education from the University of Rajshahi. The participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedures. They were further informed that their information would be kept confidential and that their participation was voluntary. Therefore, after having their written consent, data were collected from the respondents.

Data analysis

SPSS software was used to analyze the data collected from the field. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency tables, percentages, etc., were used to analyze the data.

Study findings

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Socio-demographic characteristics included the age of the student mothers, the age of their husbands, their number of children, and family type. Findings revealed that 45.2% of student mothers were 21 to 23 years old, 38.5% were 24 to 26 years old, and 16.3% were 18 to 20 years old. Findings regarding their husbands' ages showed that 58.6% of husbands were 29 to 32 years old, 29.9% were 25 to 28 years old, and 11.5% were 33 to 37 years old. Findings regarding the number of children showed that most of the student mothers have one child (98.1%). 51.9% respondents were living in a joint family, and 48.1% respondents were living in a nuclear family.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age of the respondents		
18 to 20 years old	17	16.3%
21 to 23 years old	47	45.2%
24 to 26 years old	40	38.5%
Age husband		
25 to 28 years old	31	29.9%
29 to 32 years old	61	58.6%
33 to 37 years old	12	11.5%
Number of children		
1	102	98.1%
2	2	1.9%
Type of the family		
Nuclear Family	50	48.1%
Joint Family	54	51.9%
Source: Field survey		

Table 1: Socio-Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Challenges faced during pregnancy (N=104)

Table 2 presents the findings on the challenges faced by student mothers during their pregnancy. Results indicated that 69.23% student mothers mentioned that the pregnancy was unplanned, while half of them, 30.77% mentioned about planned pregnancy. The student mothers were also asked about the challenges they faced in their academic and family lives. Findings regarding the challenges in academic life showed that 39.42% of student mothers failed to attend classes regularly, 38.46% could not study regularly, and 32.69% were unable to reach the exam hall on time. Additionally, findings regarding challenges in family life indicated that 52.88% faced problems with household duties, 34.62% with taking care of household members, and 29.81% with unexpected behavior from family members.

Challenges faced by the student mothers as caregivers

The family, which is a stronghold for social integration and cohesiveness, is mostly dependent on mothers. Children's proper development depends on their relationship with their mothers. Additionally, moms provide for their families economically in addition to being caregivers. Mothers are extremely important in a child's life, as they not only provide emotional support and foster growth and development, but also mold their morals and character. Table 3 presents the challenges faced by student mothers as caregivers to their children. Findings showed that as a student mother, 70.19% respondents faced challenges in taking care of their children. The respondents were also asked about the types of challenges

they faced. Findings indicated that 95.89% student mothers mentioned that they had to stay away from their child for a long time, 97.26% student mothers mentioned that they were unable to take care of their child, 67.12% student mothers mentioned that they were unable to feed their child properly, and 61.64% also mentioned that they faced mental pressure due to reasons mentioned above.

Challenges faced by the student mothers in their academic life

Getting a higher education is considered one of the most significant ways to equip women with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence they need. Globally, women now play a larger role and assume greater responsibility in higher education. However, student mothers pursuing higher education in Bangladesh faced frequent challenges. Our findings found that 68.27% student mothers failed to pay attention in class because they had to stay away from their children for a long time, 52.88% student mothers reported that they achieved unexpectedly lower grades due to this, and 9.62% student mothers also reported that they had to drop out at least one year due to their motherhood.

Table 5 presents the findings on the effect of staying away from the children on the mental health of the student mothers. 84.62% student mothers mentioned that a long time staying away from their child affects their mental health. They were further asked how they felt when they were at the university, and their children were at home. 48.86% student mothers mentioned that were felt depressed, 77.27% felt stressed, and 59.09% had guilty feelings because they left their child at home.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Nature of pregnancy		
Planned	32	30.77%
Unplanned	72	69.23%
Challenges faced in academic life during pregnancy		
In attending class regularly		
No	63	60.58%
Yes	41	39.42%
Study regularly		
No	64	61.54%
Yes	40	38.46%
In attending the examination on time		
No	70	67.31%
Yes	34	32.69%
Challenges faced in family life during pregnancy		
Problem faced in doing household duties		
No	49	47.12%
Yes	55	52.88%
Taking care of the household members		
No	68	65.38%
Yes	36	34.62%
Faced unexpected behavior from the family members		
No	73	70.19%
Yes	31	29.81%
Source: Field survey		

Table 2: Challenges faced by the student mothers during pregnancy (N=104)

Variables	No		Yes	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Faced challenges in child care (N=104)	31	29.81%	73	70.19%
Types of challenges faced (N=73)				
Have to stay away from the child for a long time	3	4.11%	70	95.89%
Unable to take care of her child	2	2.74%	71	97.26%
Unable to feed her child properly	24	32.88%	49	67.12%
Faced mental pressure due to the aforementioned reasons	28	38.36%	45	61.64%
Source: Field survey				

Table 3: Challenges faced by the student mothers as caregivers

Variables	No		Yes	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Failed to pay attention in class	33	31.73%	71	68.27%
Unexpected lower grades	49	47.12%	55	52.88%
The year dropped due to motherhood	94	90.38%	10	9.62%
Source: Field survey				

Table 4: Challenges faced by the student mothers in their academic life (N=104)

Variables	No		Yes	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Effect on mental health (N=104)	16	15.38	88	84.62%
Types of effect (N=88)				
Depression	45	51.14	43	48.86%
Stress	20	22.73	68	77.27%
Guilty feeling	36	40.91	52	59.09%
Source: Field survey				

Table 5: Effect on the mental health of the student mothers

Table 6 presents the findings regarding the criticisms student mothers face for being mothers during their studies. 93.27% of student mothers reported being criticized by their teachers, classmates, or community members. 61.54% of student mothers reported being

criticized by either their teachers or classmates. 53.13% of student mothers reported being criticized by their classmates, and 81.25% reported being criticized by a teacher.

Criticized for being a mother during study	No		Yes	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
From either teachers or classmates or community people (N=104)	7	6.73	97	93.27%
From either teachers or classmates (N=104)	40	38.46	64	61.54%
From any classmate (N=64)	30	46.88	34	53.13%
From any teacher (N=64)	12	18.75	52	81.25%
Source: Field survey				

Table 6: Criticized for being a mother during the study

Experience of abusive behaviors from their intimate partners

The student mothers were also asked about their experiences of abusive behavior from their intimate partner in the last six months. 36.54% student mothers responded yes, they had experienced abusive

behavior from their intimate partner during the previous six months. Findings regarding the types of abusive behavior showed that 89.47% student mothers experienced emotional abuse, and 39.47% also experienced physical abuse from their intimate partner (see Table 7).

Variables	No		Yes	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Experience of abusive behavior (N=104)	66	63.46	38	36.54%
Types of abusive behavior (N=38)				
Physical abuse	23	60.53	15	39.47%
Emotional abuse	4	10.53	34	89.47%
Source: Field survey				

Table 7: Experience of abusive behavior from an intimate partner during the last six months

Discussion

This study examined the complex challenges student mothers face in balancing their academic commitments with caregiving responsibilities within the Bangladeshi higher education context. The findings indicate that student mothers experience considerable strain fulfilling both roles, confirming the central concepts of role conflict theory, which posits that competing social roles create tension, stress, and diminished performance when responsibilities collide.

A substantial proportion of respondents reported being unable to attend classes consistently, study regularly, or maintain expected academic performance due to childcare demands, fatigue, and time limitations. These findings align with prior literature demonstrating that student mothers often experience academic disruptions caused by exhaustion, infant care, and limited time for studying [32, 33]. This study further contributes to existing research by showing that academic disengagement is not only a consequence of caregiving pressures but is also intensified by institutional and social environments that are insufficiently supportive.

A notable contribution of this research is the documentation of emotional abuse experienced by student mothers, particularly related to unmet household expectations. Emotional abuse and strained marital dynamics emerged as significant stressors that exacerbate academic difficulties. These findings closely mirror those of Vyskocil [34], who found that student mothers often feel compelled to prioritize domestic responsibilities over education, creating a continuous tension between personal aspirations and expected familial roles.

The study also highlights the prevalence of criticism and negative attitudes toward student mothers from teachers, classmates, and community members. Such social stigma reinforces feelings of guilt, stress, and isolation, and directly impacts academic focus and mental well-being. Prior studies similarly indicate that societal expectations surrounding motherhood lead to negative judgments when women pursue higher education while raising children [28]. The combination of emotional strain, academic disruptions, and social judgment

contributes to a substantial psychological burden among student mothers, reflected in reports of stress, depression, and persistent feelings of guilt.

Comparative research from countries such as South Africa, Ghana, and the United Kingdom demonstrates that student mothers across diverse contexts face similar challenges—including role conflict, fatigue, academic disengagement, and social stigma—suggesting that these barriers are global rather than unique to Bangladesh. However, the intensity of these challenges is often greater in developing nations, where limited institutional support, cultural expectations surrounding early marriage, and restricted access to childcare services magnify the pressures on student mothers. Thus, while the experiences of Bangladeshi student mothers align with international patterns, the structural and cultural constraints in Bangladesh create a more pronounced and complex set of obstacles requiring targeted policy interventions.

Compared to international research contexts, the challenges identified in this study mirror global patterns. However, the degree of academic and emotional strain observed among Bangladeshi student mothers underscores the need for context-specific institutional reforms. Overall, this study deepens the understanding of the interconnected academic, emotional, and caregiving challenges faced by student mothers and highlights the structural and interpersonal barriers within higher education that impede their academic success.

Policy implications

The findings highlight the need for higher education institutions in Bangladesh to adopt policies that better support student mothers and address the barriers that impede their academic success. Universities should implement flexible academic arrangements, including extended deadlines, hybrid or online learning options, and adaptable class schedules that accommodate caregiving responsibilities. Establishing on-campus childcare facilities or partnerships with nearby childcare providers would significantly reduce the challenges associated with balancing child-rearing and attending classes. Institutions should also develop counseling and psychosocial support services to address the mental health strain experienced by student mothers, particularly those facing emotional abuse or social stigma. Faculty and staff training programs are essential to promote an inclusive academic culture and reduce discriminatory behavior against student mothers. At the policy level, national higher education authorities should consider developing guidelines that protect and support pregnant and parenting students, ensuring a more equitable and supportive path to degree completion. Collectively, these interventions would create a more inclusive and empowering academic environment for student mothers in Bangladesh.

Limitations and further research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research was conducted at a single university, which restricts the generalizability of the results. Future studies should involve multiple universities across Bangladesh to provide a more representative understanding of student mothers' experiences. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may introduce recall or social desirability bias. Incorporating qualitative interviews or mixed-method designs could enhance the depth and accuracy of future findings. Third, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to observe changes in challenges and coping strategies over time. Longitudinal studies would help illuminate the evolving nature of academic and caregiving demands. Fourth, the study focused exclusively on student mothers within Bangladesh. Comparative studies involving student mothers in other countries could provide insights into cultural, structural, and institutional differences that influence experiences and educational outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, student mothers are expected to raise their children as well as perform well academically. However, this is not an easy

task, as student mothers face numerous challenges balancing their academic assignments, their roles as caregivers to their children, and other household duties. The study aimed to explore the difficulties student mothers face in managing their dual roles as students and caregivers to their children in the context of universities in Bangladesh. The findings revealed that the student mothers were emotionally abused by their husbands for not managing the family responsibilities on the husbands' expected time. The study further revealed that almost all student mothers reported that because of staying away for a long time from their child and not balancing their dual roles properly, their psychological health was affected, such as they felt stress and depression, and they felt guilty because they left their child at home. They also failed to attend class regularly and continue their studies, and were unable to achieve their expected results. In addition, they faced criticism from their classmates and teachers for being mothers while studying. Thus, this study argued that the challenges and consequences mentioned earlier made it more difficult for the student mothers to pursue higher education. Therefore, this study suggests that despite the aforementioned challenges and barriers, an inclusive approach is required for the student-mothers at the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh. Therefore, the findings of this study provided evidence for policymakers to formulate appropriate policies to enable student mothers to pursue higher education and feel valued and a sense of belonging within their University cultures.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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