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A Perspective on Benefits of Postgraduate Study on Women in Kenya

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Abstract:

This research study is a perspective on benefits of postgraduate study on women in Kenya with three objectives: 1) Evaluate effects of studying on a woman's life; 2) Examine what motivates women to study at postgraduate level; and 3) Explore rewards of postgraduate education to women. The subjects in this study were 32 female students reported in their role as mothers of child (ren) eighteen years old or younger enrolled for postgraduate study at University of Nairobi. Using a qualitative approach, the study gathered data from thirty-two participants through open-ended interviewing questioning, using a structured interviewing tool. These study findings reveal that although postgraduate student mothers experience conflict between various commitments like childcare, domestic, work and academic responsibilities, they were able to overcome these difficulties with highly developed organization, time-management skills, family support and by sacrificing sleep and recreating time for their families. The women were strongly motivated by the desire for personal achievement, and the opportunity to create a better future for their families specifically their children. These study findings demonstrated that postgraduate study rewarded women with a sense of freedom, growth, pride and achievement, as well as developing their professional identity. It also provided them with a major opportunity to grow and develop their personal abilities while raising their children. Suggestions for policy changes are discussed as well as the need to widen accessibility and participation in graduate study for women who have young children.

Keywords: *Motherhood, education, experience, postgraduate.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Access to education is an indicator of women's status in any society. Women return to college for a variety of reasons, including career advancement and personal fulfillment, Association of American University Women (AAUW, 2000). Being a student mother however involves adaptation to the changed expectations and circumstances. Previous studies both in developed and developing countries show that a girl's education is important for the welfare of the family and future development. Increased schooling of the mother is associated with larger effects on child health, schooling and adult productivity than increased schooling of the father. Historically the global picture has been one of discrimination against girls and women in education, due to cultural perceptions of the roles which women are expected as reflected in their access to education. In many African countries, educating girls is seen as a poor investment when it is expected that they will marry and cease working to take on family responsibilities. In Kenya, gender based inequalities largely contribute to lower enrollment of girls, less retention of those who enroll, poor performance in many subjects, particularly mathematics and sciences and technical disciplines, and less participation of women in tertiary and higher levels of learning. These imbalances serve to limit the extent to which women's potentials can be fully developed as they also cumulatively affect levels and nature of their participation in the labor market, politics and managerial positions.

Combining postgraduate studies with motherhood impacts every aspect of a woman's life by rewarding them in the form of personal growth, pride and a sense of achievement. Studying provides a sense of freedom and excitement from being exposed to a vast amount of knowledge (Vryonides and Visilakis, 2008). The sense of personal achievement and self-development becomes the driving force for women with children to study at postgraduate level (Walkup, 2004). It acts as a catalyst for personal growth that transcend the financial and economic benefits as well as a source of pride that increases their self-esteem (Haleman, 2004). Postgraduate education encourages tolerance and expands social networks (Murray, 2009), as well as a higher sense of voluntary and charitable work (Vila, 2005). Similarly, postgraduate education enhances career prospects for women by improving their earning power and financial security upon graduation (Bosch, 2013). Thus, women with more education have enhanced health and greater levels of well-being (Johnston, 2004), because they have greater access to resources, employment, and supportive environments which allow them handle multiple roles effectively.

1.2. Objectives

- i. Evaluate effects of studying in a woman's life;

- ii. Examine what motivates women to study at postgraduate level; and
- iii. Explore rewards of postgraduate education to women.

2. Methods

2.1. Introduction

The study focused on the benefits of postgraduate study on women in Kenya. Owing to the nature of this study, the research design was mainly qualitative and face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher with 32 female students reported in their role as mothers of child (ren) eighteen years old or younger enrolled for postgraduate study at University of Nairobi using an interview guide. In this study, qualitative research method focused on the way graduate student mothers interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (Artikson et al., 2001). The use of qualitative research enabled the researcher to gain a rich, in-depth understanding to why these mothers return for postgraduate studies and their experiences in combining the two roles of motherhood and education. The researcher chose this design because it uses open-ended questions in the interview, where the participants provide their own answers to the subject of investigation. This allowed the meanings and experiences of postgraduate student mothers to be captured allowing more freedom to give honest and specific answers. Here the researcher maintained direct contact with participants by asking and clarifying questions as needed (Creswell, 2009). By using qualitative research, the researcher gained greater insight into the behaviour of the postgraduate student mothers and the reasons that govern such behaviors.

The study was carried out at the University of Nairobi which is a collegiate research university based in Nairobi and one of the largest institutions of higher learning in Kenya. The university has six colleges namely: Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences, Architecture and engineering, Biological Sciences, Education and External Studies, Health sciences, as well as college of humanities and Social Sciences (University of Nairobi, 2013). Purposive selection of this institution ensured that diverse views of students from all disciplines were captured. University of Nairobi is a public institution with diversified academic programmes and specializations in sciences, applied sciences, technology, humanities, social sciences and the arts. It records the largest number of student admissions for degree courses per annum. It comprises both regular and parallel students who attend classes day and evening. These students come from different walks of life with different interests and skill sets. Purposive selection of this institution ensured diversity as the researcher will be able to capture diverse views represented by both groups regarding role strain.

2.2. Sampling Design of the Study

The study adopted both probability and non-probability sampling methods. More specifically, the study adopted purposive and snowball sampling techniques. University of Nairobi was selected purposively. In selecting 32 student mothers, snowball sampling method was adopted.

2.3. Type and Sources of Data

In this study, both primary and secondary sources of data were used to understand the benefits of postgraduate education on women. Primary data was gathered directly from individual postgraduate student mothers (Key respondents) from university of Nairobi by use of an interview guide respectively. Observational data involved noting and recording of events and behaviors of postgraduate student mothers by use of observation checklist. In this study, the researcher employed both participant and non-participant observation. Here observational methods have the advantage of directly evaluating learners' involvement and engagement in the learning environment and with the learning activities. Secondary data was obtained from university records, organizational records semi-structured and structured interviews, field notes, observation records and other personal, research-related documents.

2.4. Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative procedure of data analysis. The individual responses were analyzed, categorized and interpreted to draw conclusions. First, the researcher read through the transcripts and jotted down comments, notes, thoughts, and observations in the margins. Second, the researcher summarized the marginal notes by grouping data into various themes. Third, code labels were assigned to each section. Fourth, the preliminary codes were examined for overlap and redundancy. Fifth, the researcher eliminated redundant codes and collapsed similar codes, which were narrowed down to broader themes. The new list of code words was then used to examine whether these codes revealed common themes and recurring patterns. Last, the different data sets were continuously read and analyzed to refine the categories and to ensure that no text sections was overlooked. The findings were presented in narrative and prose for form.

3. Results

3.1. Social and Demographic Characteristics

The participants comprised of thirty-two female postgraduate students studying at University of Nairobi. Twenty-one of the participants were enrolled in a Master's program while eleven were PhD students. The women ranged in age from 25 to 58 years old, and the number of children each woman had ranged between one and four children. The participants' children were aged between 1-36 yrs. Table1 provides further demographic information about the participants and their children.

S.N	Age	Degree	Degree Specialization	Marital Status	Religion	No. of Children	Age of Children	College	Family Support	Additional Notes (Balancing Gender Roles)
R1	32	Master	P. Planning	Married	Protestant	1	2	CEES	Support	Family duties greatly affect by study
R2	33	Master	Sociology	Married	Protestant	2	9 and 5	CHSS	Support	Time and work overload constraints
R3	47	Master	CD	Married	Protestant	2	18 and 10	CHSS	No Support	Disappointments from Department
R4	38	Master	CD	Married	Catholic	4	15,11, 9, 11	CHSS	Support	Ability to balance conflicting roles
R5	34	Master	Finance	Married	Catholic	2	9 and 7	CHSS	Support	Coping well with studies
R6	29	PhD	Finance	Married	Protestant	1	4	CHSS	Support	Challenged by Financial constraints
R7	32	PhD	Anthropology	Married	Protestant	2	8 and 3	CHSS	Support	Exhaustion from conflicting tasks
R8	33	Master	H. R	Married	Protestant	1	2	CHSS	Support	Baby reduces my concentration
R9	44	Master	P. Planning	Single	Protestant	2	15 and 17	CEES	Support	Conflicting roles reduces study time
R10	35	Master	CD	Single	Protestant	1	3	CHSS	Support	Money is the problem
R11	44	PhD	Finance	Married	Catholic	2	15 and 13	CHSS	No Support	Insufficient reading time
R12	47	PhD	Nursing	Married	Protestant	4	23,20, 17, 9	CHS	Support	Supervisor has issues with my tribe
R13	37	Master	CD	Married	Protestant	4	13 and 10	CHSS	Support	Uncooperative/unfriendly lectures
R14	34	Master	Strategic Mnt	Married	Catholic	2	6 and 9	CEES	Support	Unsupportive employer
R15	32	Master	CD	Married	Protestant	1	1	CHSS	No Support	isencouragements from my department
R16	43	PhD	Bus Admin	Married	Catholic	3	21, 17, 13	CHSS	Support	Ability to balance Conflicting roles
R17	33	Master	Sociology	Married	Protestant	2	9 and 5	CHSS	No Support	Guilty of squeezed family time
R18	29	Master	P. Planning	Married	Protestant	2	5 and 3	CEES	Support	Coping well with roles
R19	32	Master	Sociology	Married	Protestant	1	7	CHSS	No Support	Ethnicity is a big Challenge
R20	58	Master	Disaster Mnt	Married	Protestant	4	36,32,31 18	CHSS	No Support	Money issues is my challenge
R21	28	Master	Journalism	Single	Catholic	1	3	CHSS	Support	Coping well with roles
R22	35	PhD	Journalism	Single	Catholic	1	12	CHSS	Support	I prioritize work school then family
R23	38	PhD	Education	Married	Protestant	3	9, 6 and 3	CEES	No Support	Great Support by employer
R24	46	PhD	P. Mnt	Married	Catholic	2	13 and 9	CEES	Support	Coping well with roles
R25	35	Master	Bus Admin	Married	Protestant	2	5 and 3	CHSS	No Support	Demands from family roles
R26	34	Master	Architecture	Married	Protestant	2	6 and 3	CAE	Support	Challenges from children
R27	40	Master	Sociology	Married	Protestant	4	16, 12, 8, 4	CHSS	Support	challenge in balancing roles
R28	44	Master	Law	Married	Catholic	2	13 and 8	CHSS	Support	Unable to balance Roles
R29	31	PhD	Bus Admin	Single	Protestant	2	4 and 1	CHSS	No Support	Difficulties combining roles
R30	25	PhD	P. Mnt	Single	Protestant	1	2	CEES	Support	Difficulties in paying fees
R31	28	Master	C. Change	Single	Catholic	1	2	CBPS	Support	Money issues is my challenge
R32	46	PhD	Finance	Married	Protestant	3	16, 12, 8	CHSS	No Support	Guilty of squeezed family time

Table 1: Showing summary of Demographic Information on Participants and their Children

3.2. Relevant Themes to Experiences of Balancing Motherhood and Postgraduate Study

3.2.1. Introduction

In this study, participants identified a number of issues relevant to the benefits of postgraduate study to women. Several sub-themes emerged from the master themes and within those sub-themes, relevant issues were identified. This section reports in detail findings for each theme and accompanying subtheme, and explores the relationship between themes.

Themes	Explanation	Sub-themes
Effects of studying:	Because they study	Hope for a better future; Role modeling; Parenting role by spouse; Networking opportunity and organized child care.
Motivation:	Why they study	Opportunity and Personal achievement and development.
Rewards:	What they get out of it	Sense of pride and achievement

Table 2

3.2.2. Effects of Studying on a Woman's life

- Hope for a Better Future for their Children:

In this study, women return to study provided an improved lifestyle for their families, because of hope for a better employment opportunity, and a desire to develop a professional identity outside of motherhood. By becoming more qualified, the women hoped they would enjoy better career prospects and higher salaries. For R6, studying enabled her to earn her own money. This is consistent with the findings of a research by White, (2008), that revealed that women returned for postgraduate study for hope of a better job upon completing their studies.

- Role Modeling to their Children:

These mothers considered role-modeling for their children as part of being a good mother. Their pursuit of an identity outside of motherhood taught their children to follow their dreams and being autonomous. For R4 through the confidence she gained from studying at postgraduate level, she felt that she was better able to parent her own children. This study is consistent with that of Suitor et al., (2008), where women studies benefited their children as well.

- Parenting Role by Spouse:

In this study, women believed that their absence from the family provided the opportunity for their partners to take a more active parenting role. R4 said “he spends extra time with his children because I am in school. R1 related: “Now that I am in school, my husband has a one on one time with his children.”

- Networking:

Women in this study indicated that coming back to study has enabled them meet reliable friends and future employers. R22 indicated that she met a classmate who is currently her employer and enrolled her for the current position she holds at her work place. R10 affirmed that she met a reliable friend during her study.

- Organized Child Care:

For some women, going back for postgraduate study provided freedom from household chores that no longer hold them back after they organized for alternative child care. R4 indicated that by enrolling for postgraduate study from, she now survives on organized child care and no longer bothers with house chores.

3.2.3. Factors that Motivate women to Study at Postgraduate Level

- Opportunity:

Many women spoke of time being right and the circumstances favourable. Some women were motivated to study at postgraduate because that opportunity was possible like their children being older or by gaining admission into a particular course at University of Nairobi. For some, despite a desire to study, life circumstances did not always allow them the opportunity to do so like arrival of unplanned new born and financial constraints. For R20, despite the support she received from her husband, she had no opportunity to study until her children were big enough.

- Personal Achievement and Self Development:

To women in this study, postgraduate study allowed the women to develop an identity outside of their roles of mother and wife, and for many, this was an empowering transformation and part of their continued self-development. To R13, postgraduate education gave her the opportunity to challenge herself academically, emotionally and physically, and each success increased her sense of personal achievement. This finding is consistent with research by Pare, (2009), which showed that one benefit of higher education for mothers was the opportunity to develop an identity outside of motherhood.

3.2.4. Rewards of Postgraduate Education to Women

- Sense of Pride and Achievement

Participants indicated that postgraduate education would enhance their career prospects and improve their earning power and financial security upon graduation. The belief that postgraduate study would benefit their family in the long run helped these women to reconcile the short-term financial disadvantages for their families. They felt that they were being “good mothers” despite the short-term difficulties they encountered, by positioning themselves to provide for their children and improve their standard of living in the future. This is consistent with the study by Estes’, (2011) that indicated that participants were motivated to finish their education in order to make life better for themselves and their families. The fact that a university education improved R6’s self-esteem is consistent with a study by Walkup, (2004), the longer women stay in higher education, the more confident they become.

4. Discussion

This study analyses benefits of postgraduate study on women in Kenya. Results demonstrated that women studying at postgraduate level were primarily motivated by a desire for personal achievement and self-satisfaction. Over the course of their studies they employed positive coping strategies to deal with the challenges that arose. The study showed that postgraduate study rewarded student mothers in the form of individual benefits and benefits to their children. Individual benefits included increased self-esteem and a sense of professional identity. Children benefitted from their mother’s postgraduate education because she provided a positive educational role model, developed skills to assist her children with their own education, and positioned her to improve the financial future of her family.

- Positive Nature of the Experience

In this study, many mothers spoke of the positive nature of their experiences. This relates to a study by Vryonides and Visilakis (2008), who pointed experience as positive and enriching despite the challenges of combining motherhood and postgraduate education. It is contrary to the findings by Reay, (2003) that demonstrated that experience of student mothers was endured rather than celebrated. The study used terms such as “problematize widening participation” “time poverty, “failure of social and educational policy.”

- Motivations

Personal Ambition and Self Satisfaction: Mothers in this study were motivated by a sense of personal ambition and desire for achievement and self-satisfaction. They were also motivated by opportunity as they wanted to achieve their degrees despite the feeling of guilt for spending less time with their children. This finding is contrary to that in Pare, (2009) that revealed that women were full of guilt for studying. This is an indication that women embraced the liberal ideals of individual ambition and achievement.

5. Conclusion

This study analyses benefits of postgraduate study on women in Kenya. It has clearly demonstrated that postgraduate student mothers are able to cope with the demands of combining motherhood with education. Women in this study viewed themselves as equal to men

in all respects and that their decision to study was a valid choice and did not diminish their ability to be good mothers to their children. However, the researcher interprets that there was no evidence of “good mother” in the study where women are expected to only spend all their time with children and forsake other rewarding activities outside motherhood. Women combined and performed roles simultaneously.

6. References

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