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Studies and motherhood: academic trajectories in the nursing program in the Ecuadorian public university context

Estudios y maternidad: trayectorias académicas en la carrera de enfermería en el contexto universitario público ecuatoriano

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ABSTRACT

University students who become mothers face a daily double burden of responsibilities: caring for their children, managing household chores, and fulfilling academic obligations; consequently, it is a challenge to maintain concentration and a consistent academic balance. In this context, the objective of the research is to describe the experiences of motherhood and its influence on the academic performance of nursing students at a public university in Cuenca, Ecuador. Thru a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, from September to December 2024, using purposive sampling until saturation was reached with 10 students. The data were collected thru semi-structured interviews and analyzed by categories using the Taguette software. The results show that motherhood affects academic performance due to overload and lack of time, although it also serves as a source of motivation. Student mothers face academic, economic, emotional, and social challenges, such as long hours, limited support, financial constraints, and social prejudices, which underscores the importance of having support networks. It is concluded that, although motherhood brings joy and love, it also produces stress and sadness, since balancing the roles of mother and student involves significant sacrifices of time and personal well-being.

Keywords: Life Experiences; Motherhood; Academic Performance; Students.

RESUMEN

Las estudiantes universitarias, que asumen la maternidad, enfrentan diariamente una doble carga de responsabilidades: atender a su progenie, organizar las tareas del hogar, además de las responsabilidades académicas; en consecuencia, es un desafío mantener la concentración y un equilibrio académico constante. Bajo este contexto, el objetivo de la investigación es describir las experiencias de la maternidad y su influencia en el desempeño académico de estudiantes de Enfermería de una universidad pública de Cuenca, Ecuador. Mediante un enfoque cualitativo con diseño fenomenológico entre septiembre y diciembre de 2024, utilizando un muestreo intencional hasta alcanzar la saturación con 10 estudiantes. Los datos se recogieron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y se analizaron por categorías con el programa Taguette. Los resultados muestran que la maternidad afecta el rendimiento académico por la sobrecarga y la falta de tiempo, aunque también constituye una fuente de motivación. Las estudiantes enfrentan retos académicos, económicos, emocionales y sociales, como horarios extensos, escaso apoyo, limitaciones financieras y

prejuicios sociales, lo que resalta la importancia de contar con redes de apoyo. Se concluye que, aunque la maternidad genera alegría y amor, también produce estrés y tristeza, ya que equilibrar los roles de madre y estudiante implica sacrificios significativos de tiempo y bienestar personal.

Palabras clave: Experiencias de Vida; Maternidad; Rendimiento Académico; Estudiantes.

INTRODUCTION

A historic event in the fight for women's rights transcends the attainment of academic and professional goals, which are undoubtedly affected by their integration into the workplace.⁽¹⁾ However, the role of motherhood, shaped by a social construct encompassing a set of qualities, practices, and responsibilities, takes on particular significance, especially when women assume the roles of woman, mother, and student; these roles depend on the social and economic support they receive.⁽²⁾

Nevertheless, the struggle for social and cultural construction is another challenge that mothers in academia have to face. On the one hand, there are cultural beliefs about motherhood that should take precedence in women's roles, as there is no emotional value that is representative, that is a central axis in their lives, more important than caring for their children. And, on the other hand, there is the personal motivation to fulfill a dream and give their children a better quality of life.^(3,4,5)

Consequently, women's academic achievement in college often leads them to postpone motherhood to prioritize their professional development. Faced with the challenge of fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously — such as caring for children and managing household responsibilities — people experience physical and emotional exhaustion.⁽⁶⁾

For UNESCO, gender inequality in higher education remains a universal problem; in fact, the United States has 57 % female students and 78 % male students. This reality is more serious in developing countries, including Africa and Asia.^(7,8) Meanwhile, in Latin America, motherhood often hinders the educational continuity of university students, putting them at risk of dropping out.⁽⁹⁾ This is corroborated by Ramón's 2023 study,⁽⁵⁾ conducted in Mexico, which found that being a mother and taking care of children leads students to be absent from the classroom. Meanwhile, Hernández⁽¹⁰⁾ describes how motherhood tends to generate gender discrimination, which jeopardizes the admission and retention of mothers in university.

In Uruguay, meanwhile, motherhood plays a crucial role in exacerbating gender disparities throughout academic trajectories. Although gender inequalities are almost non-existent at the beginning of the educational trajectory, they increase with progress in professional life and are accentuated when women become mothers.⁽¹¹⁾

In addition to the consequences faced by women in Argentina in terms of academic continuity, the study by Churqui and Paz⁽¹²⁾ describes the forced motherhood of women who are victims of sexual violence, which also impacts their educational and personal development, combined with insufficient legal protection due to confusing regulations and possible revictimization by the judicial system, restricting access to academic and professional opportunities.

In Ecuador, the study by Belduma, Cedeño, and Chamba⁽¹³⁾ reveals that the dual responsibility of being a mother and a student affects academic performance due to time constraints, requiring students to reorganize their educational and social habits, which causes physical and psychological exhaustion, decreasing self-esteem and self-sufficiency.

The process of pregnancy itself, with all its physical, psychological, and social changes, has noticeable consequences for finances and health, undoubtedly impacting academic performance.^(14,15)

This study draws on the results of an undergraduate thesis. It addresses motherhood among nursing students, highlighting the double burden of responsibilities and its impact on stress, concentration, and available time. The objective was to describe the experiences of motherhood and its effects on the academic performance of nursing students during their university studies. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used between September and December 2024, with 10 participants selected through purposive sampling until data saturation.

METHOD

The research is qualitative in nature, with a descriptive-observational design, aimed at understanding students' experiences and perceptions in a real context without altering the phenomenon's conditions. The population consisted of students enrolled during the period September 2024 - February 2025 who had earned full academic credits in the Nursing program. Through purposive sampling, 10 students who met the inclusion criteria were included until information saturation was reached, that is, when responses became repetitive and did not add new relevant elements. Before the interviews began, the purpose and method of the research were explained in writing and verbally, and informed consent was obtained. To ensure confidentiality, alphanumeric

codes (P01, P02) were assigned. Where “P” stands for participant and the number is assigned according to the order in which the interview was conducted.

The main instrument used for data collection was the semi-structured interview, which was reviewed and validated by experts in qualitative research from the Faculty. The questions were designed to align with the objectives and grouped into four thematic categories: academic workload and student performance during motherhood; networks and sources of support; socioeconomic factors; and emotional well-being. The interviews were conducted in person, with an average duration of 20 minutes between September and December 2024, and were conducted by previously trained students. The audio recordings were made with permission and transcribed verbatim in Word format using the Taguette program. Field notes were used to integrate contextual observations during data collection.

A thematic content analysis was carried out, following three main stages:

1. Pre-analysis: comprehensive reading of the transcripts, removal of irrelevant elements, verbatim, without altering the content.
2. Coding: identification of key ideas by underlining and assigning codes.
3. Categorization: grouping codes by similarity, organizing them into thematic categories that responded to the study objectives.

The variables analyzed focused on psychosocial, academic, and emotional aspects related to motherhood and student performance. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the corresponding Faculty (CEISH-UC-2024-017EO-E).

RESULTS

Of the ten participants, seven are married, two are single, and one is divorced. The number of children ranged from one to two. In terms of academic progress, they are enrolled in the third to eighth cycle of their degree program. Regarding financial support, the results suggest an equal distribution between students who work and those who receive support from family and partners.

Development of categories

Category 1. Academic workload and student performance in motherhood

The study population indicates that motherhood at university entails increased responsibilities that go beyond maintaining good academic performance, with dedication distributed among academic tasks, the child, the partner, and the family. In addition, they develop new habits around eating, rest, sleep, and socializing.

“Of course, yes, you can obviously see the change because the hours of study are no longer the same. You have to balance things for your baby, the house, and also the university” (P01).

“The workload is a little more complicated since I became a mother.” (P06)

Subcategory 1. Academic performance

Students face a lack of time and an overload of responsibilities, juggling dual roles as mothers and academics. They are sleep-deprived, but sometimes they are overwhelmed by negative thoughts, such as thoughts of abandoning their studies.

“It does change a bit, because you have to put the baby to sleep first and then do your own things. And if he doesn’t fall asleep, you don’t have time to do your homework. It’s even worse if he gets sick; you have to stop what you’re doing to take care of him first. You neglect your studies and your role as a mother” (P02).

“Yes, in fact, I almost failed English because I missed the semester when I was pregnant, and it affected me a lot. I learned almost nothing and almost failed” (P09).

Subcategory 2. Academic schedules and boarding school

The length and distribution of the curriculum, long days, fragmented schedules, spaced-out hours, and boarding school are issues that have become significant challenges due to the high demands, thereby increasing the pressure and stress of passing. In addition, it is an experience devoid of feelings.

“The teachers are NOT flexible at all. I had to leave urgently because my blood pressure had risen. And the teacher said to me, ‘No, you had planned to leave urgently’” (P04).

“... I think boarding school is too strict. The day you miss, you have to make it up. And when do you make it up? If you don’t have time...” (P06).

Category 2. Networks and sources of support

The information reflects that family support is a fundamental pillar. The narratives show that, despite the difficulties of motherhood in the academic context, the motivation and support of loved ones become a driving force to keep going.

«Of course, if my parents didn't help me, I wouldn't really be able to study» (P07).

“My dad told me (...) I'm not going to send you money, I'm not going to call you, nothing, because right now you are your partner's responsibility” (P04).

Subcategory 1. Family support

The participants recognize that their family is their primary source of support for staying in college. In addition to the security that comes with leaving their children in the care of trusted people, such as their mother, in most cases.

“...There are problems, as I say, with my dad, with my classmates, with my partner too, as we were coming to terms with the news. Now I live with my partner, who has always supported me” (P04).

Subcategory 2. Support from a partner

The participants who have their partner's support in domestic tasks and in caring for their baby. In other situations, abandonment by the partner and irresponsibility are factors that destabilize and discourage them from completing their studies.

“I haven't been able to maintain a relationship with my daughters' father because it's tough to maintain the house and go to university” (P01).

Subcategory 3. Institutional support

Teacher empathy and classmates' solidarity are a great help to students, which helps maintain a balance between university and motherhood. The implementation of breastfeeding rooms, free childcare services, and psychological support aids in their learning process.

“They asked me for certificates as if giving birth were something I made up, which I had to provide within 24 or 48 hours. They wanted to grade me halfway through... They didn't want to take my oral lessons” (P10).

“And now I use the campus daycare service. (...) They treat her well (...)” (P02).

“I tried to apply for the university's daycare, but they told me there is a huge waiting list (...), so I don't have any support from the university. I use private daycare, which I pay for out of my own pocket” (P01).

Category 3. Socioeconomic factor

The students note that the increase in expenses is evident and has become a concern, causing distraction, stress, and, therefore, affecting academic performance.

“My mom cries because there is no money. And that's why I'm also embarrassed to ask her for money. You're in class and you think, 'Am I going to eat or not? I've lost a lot of weight since starting college, to be honest. To save that money so I don't have to spend it on food” (P03).

“I do have my mom's support, so there have been times when I've said to her, 'Mom, can you give me \$10 for college, for copies? And my mom has helped me out” (P06).

Category 4. Emotional well-being

The participants emphasize that motherhood has brought them deep positive emotions, such as happiness, joy, affection, and love; it serves as a driving force that pushes them to reorganize their lives, make more conscious decisions, and value their personal and academic growth. It has also generated situations of frustration, fear, anxiety, and insecurity.

“...it does affect you, I mean, you put on a strong front, but then at the end of the day you break down and cry, and then you wash your face and carry on [laughs]” (P01).

“(...) I am happy to have my daughter, who is such a wonderful gift, and because I have my daughter by my side (...) she is healthy and alive, which is the most important thing for me...” (P05).

Subcategory 1. Discrimination and exclusion

Some of the participants mention that they have not felt directly discriminated against. Still, others report that they have received direct comments and derogatory looks because of their pregnancy or being a young mother. In addition, societal pressure to conform to certain expectations has been noted for not complying with social stereotypes, such as those around marriage.

«...That nurses mistreat you just because you're a young mother. It's not fair (...). And that a doctor talks about you while you're awake and says, <There's a girl with another girl,> the dirty looks, or sometimes I go out with my daughter and my niece: 'Oh, poor thing!' (...) that I've gone to spread my legs. Or what, didn't anyone tell you? Didn't your parents talk to you?” (P03).

“... Everyone looks at you as if it were something abnormal (...) they stare at you a lot (.) as if they were scared or something, in that sense, it makes you feel bad” (P07).

“They tell me, no, don't neglect the baby, but you'll see the university and also your baby. (...) you're neglecting her, you prefer a computer to your baby” (P04).

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the nursing profession has historically been configured as an extension of the caregiving roles assigned to women within the social sphere, and it has a history linked to violence against women in different dimensions.⁽¹⁶⁾ In light of the results, this makes sense, as participants note that motherhood anchored to the university experience is marked by a double burden of responsibilities, not only academic but also family-related.

However, the literature shows that pursuing a career stigmatized as feminine, in which the fulfillment of traditional roles, such as maternal, reproduces inequalities from the masculinized perspective of the health professions. These often assign women welfare roles associated with obedience and submission.^(17,18) And it is frequently overlooked that nursing is a scientific profession with theoretical foundations and growing development within the field of health.⁽¹⁹⁾ The care provided by the mother-students participating in the study, which is mistakenly considered innate to their bodies, includes not only raising children but also siblings and other family members and social sphere members, whom they support within the meaning of networks imposed and inherited by society.^(15,20)

Without a doubt, university life is a complex process of interrelationships and representations, the legacy of historically assigned gender roles.⁽²¹⁾ Hence, academic, family, social, economic, and emotional factors condition and assign a double burden to the roles and activities that university women perform. Students must balance their roles as mothers, daughters, students, and partners, which requires reorganizing their eating, sleeping, and study habits.^(22,23,24) In this regard, several participants stated that this influences their academic performance because before devoting themselves to their university tasks, they must feed, put their children to sleep, and manage their care, and only when they have completed these tasks do they take on their role as students, but by then they are already mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted, and this is compounded by the academic stress⁽²⁵⁾ caused by facing the challenges and demands of these roles.

The results also reveal that the academic system is neither flexible nor consistent with the demands placed on women-mothers who are studying for a degree. On the one hand, students report long study hours and discontinuous, fragmented classroom schedules. The same is true of the internship period, which lasts 1 year and is divided into 6 months in hospitals and 6 months in primary care. This rigidity in the academic system (schedules, curricula, internships) reveals tensions and barriers that are reflected in the time devoted to childcare, breastfeeding, and feeding.⁽²⁶⁾ Furthermore, the time it takes to complete their studies is affected because, due to the limitations, many reschedule courses or internships.

It is worth noting the conditioning from family support in most cases, as there is a smaller group of student mothers who, if they manage to develop adaptation strategies and establish a gradual balance, reflect a process of resilience and ability to manage the emotional and academic burden, because they see the profession not only as a personal achievement, but also as a crucial investment in their children's future.⁽²⁷⁾ For participants, academic support allows teachers to show empathy and flexibility, while a lack of understanding increases the emotional burden and can hinder their ability to remain in college.⁽²⁴⁾ At the institutional level, services such as daycare centers and nursing rooms are perceived as crucial support, although limitations in access, lack of awareness, and logistical rigidity reduce their effectiveness.⁽²⁸⁾

The research reaffirms that family and partner support networks are essential for the academic and emotional well-being of university mothers. Indeed, their absence, whether due to abandonment or lack of shared responsibility, increases the economic and psychological burden.⁽²⁹⁾ This is why some participants feel responsible for not balancing caregiving or household maintenance with university studies.

On the other hand, strong emotional networks and constant emotional support strengthen their motivation, self-confidence, and ability to continue their education successfully. This finding aligns with previous studies that link emotional resilience to the construction of support networks and the development of positive attitudes in the face of adversity.^(30,31,32) Here, the participants highlight the role of the university in providing support services such as *Kínder Campus* (an early childhood development center that welcomes the children of members of the University of Cuenca community in Ecuador), but which, unfortunately, does not meet the demand for places. This is why several mothers indicated that, in some instances, they have been able to access the daycare center, while in others, they are on a waiting list; the latter group has had to hire paid daycare services outside the university environment.

Finally, the study highlights the persistence of stereotypes and discriminatory practices towards young mothers, both in the university environment and in society. Participants report derogatory comments, moral judgments, and stigmatizing attitudes, especially for not conforming to traditional models of "good behavior" or the nuclear family. They report feeling pressured when a social model of well-being and child-rearing behavior is imposed on them. For them, these types of passive-aggressive observations create a constant sense of scrutiny that affects their self-esteem and emotional well-being⁽¹⁷⁾ and can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, or self-imposed pressure in a world that is already complicated for those who aspire to complete their professional careers.

For all these reasons, it is necessary to rethink university policies and teaching practices from a gender perspective and through dialogue with aspiring nursing students, because it is essential to understand the cultural and family background that each student brings with them. as this is the only way to promote an equitable and inclusive university environment that is capable of recognizing motherhood as a reality experienced by women who study, and that it is a legitimate condition within their lives and academic careers.

CONCLUSIONS

Motherhood has a direct impact on the academic performance of nursing students, as it requires them to reorganize their time and energy, including changes in their eating habits, rest, and social activities. The responsibilities of university life and parenting can lead to an overload of activities, reduced performance, and episodes of physical and emotional exhaustion. The university academic structure represents an additional challenge due to the rigidity of schedules, the workload, and the demands of the internship. Added to this, the lack of teaching flexibility and effective work-study-motherhood reconciliation policies deepens the difficulties of permanence.

Consequently, support networks are a decisive factor in continuing studies. Family support, particularly from the students' mothers and fathers, is the primary source of financial support and childcare. This also raises the issue of grandparents taking on the care of their grandchildren, which implies other social problems. For their part, partners' support is ambivalent: in some cases, it is essential, while in others, abandonment exacerbates tensions. Finally, institutional support is perceived as insufficient, constrained by bureaucratic procedures, a lack of empathy, and limited availability of childcare services.

Socioeconomic factors are among the main barriers. The increase in expenses associated with motherhood, along with domestic responsibilities and, in some cases, the need to work, affects the emotional stability and academic dedication of female students. In this sense, motherhood should not be romanticized, as it can have ambivalent effects on emotional well-being. While it provides satisfaction, a sense of purpose, and motivation to continue studying, it also brings experiences of frustration, anxiety, and insecurity. Added to this are episodes of discrimination and stigmatization for being young mothers, which increases the vulnerability of this group.

In short, the experience of being a mother at university is fraught with structural, social, and emotional tensions. The agency of the students, the support of their family networks, and, to a lesser extent, institutional support, enable many to continue their academic careers. However, there is an urgent need to strengthen university policies on inclusion, academic flexibility, and comprehensive support for student mothers to guarantee their right to higher education on an equitable basis. These policies must ensure that students remain in and complete their studies and, even after they have qualified, have guarantees to exercise their right to motherhood and to work.

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