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Study of Nursing Mothers

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ABSTRACT

The participation of women in a higher education program depends on the extent to which the program takes into consideration the special needs of women—issues that have long plagued women's participation in education programs. In this study, we found that issues like childcare have not received any special consideration in the delivery of part-time higher education programs. This paper argues that university administration should review its present arrangements with regard to the participation of nursing mothers, for example, in part-time academic work. Efforts should be made to make daily academic activities *nursing-mother friendly*—reviewing the timetable to provide *baby time-out* and allowing for fewer daily academic activities; providing adequate daycare for children; and providing special counseling to alleviate the childcare and learning stress faced by nursing mothers.

RÉSUMÉ

La participation des femmes à un programme d'enseignement supérieur dépend du degré auquel le programme porte attention aux besoins spéciaux des femmes – des questions qui affectent depuis longtemps la participation des femmes à des programmes d'éducation. Dans cette étude, nous avons trouvé que des enjeux tels que les soins aux enfants n'ont pas été considérés de façon spéciale dans la livraison des programmes d'enseignement supérieur à temps partiel. Cette communication fait valoir que l'université devrait réviser ses arrangements actuels en considérant la participation des mères allaitantes, par exemple, dans le travail universitaire à temps partiel. Des efforts devraient être faits pour faciliter l'accès aux activités universitaires quotidiennes pour les mères allaitantes : revoir l'horaire pour y ajouter des pauses-bébé et permettre moins d'activités universitaires quotidiennes ; fournir une garderie adéquate pour les

enfants ; et fournir du counselling spécialisé pour atténuer le stress éprouvé par les mères allaitantes par rapport aux soins aux enfants et à l'apprentissage.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian women, like women the world over, but especially those in the developing world, face limited opportunities to develop to their full potential. The 1995 United Nations' Beijing "Platform of Action" listed priority areas where further action was vital to ensure that women were personally empowered to make their full contribution to social development. For instance, the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) specifically addressed women's rights to education, training, employment, property and inheritance, credit, and other resources and opportunities on an equal basis with men (UNICEF, 2001).

Historically, Nigerian women's self-advancement has been curtailed by the burden of reproduction, as well as by associated cultural views of the basic role of women as that of child bearers, child raisers, and homemakers, with limited reason to engage in wider and more challenging aspirations, including education. The Nigerian formal school system, particularly in secondary schools, puts girls at a considerable disadvantage. For example, the school system does not accommodate pregnant girls. A teenage girl who becomes pregnant must drop out of school. The boy responsible for her pregnancy, however, is merely suspended and eventually allowed to continue his educational program. This is one of many ways in which young women are denied the opportunity to pursue education to meaningful levels. This gap between men and women's access to higher education is also a statement about Nigerian society's capacity and willingness to provide equal opportunities to all women, irrespective of their situation.

Women in Nigeria are slowly, but increasingly, demanding access to skills and information that will empower them to actively and effectively participate in local issues. The interest in education as a tool for women's empowerment was part of a general awakening to women's issues (Olomolaiye, 1988), which was further promoted and developed during the United Nations' decade for women (1975–1985). Since then, the number of women enrolled at all levels of education in many parts of the world has improved dramatically. In Nigeria, the percentage of females enrolled at the secondary-

school level increased from 13% in 1980 to 30% in 1999. At the University level, the overall percentage of enrolment of women increased to 29.8% during the same period (Federal Office of Statistics, 1999). Beginning in the 1980s, the adoption of different forms of continuing education practice in most Nigerian tertiary institutions provided educational opportunities to neglected populations, particularly women.

A considerable number of expectant and nursing mothers now attend part-time classes in virtually all institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. During 2003, for example, 7 expectant and 19 nursing mothers attended classes in the Bachelor of Education part-time program at the University of Benin in Benin City. The main strengths of continuing education (no matter its type, form, or level) are flexibility, a capacity to meet existential changes, and relevance to the developmental needs of persons and nations. Eldred and Johnson (1977) noted that, within the context of continuing education, the University of Benin's Part Time Higher Education Program involved:

... the provision of an alternative form of higher education. It seeks to build a highly individualized and flexible program of learning and makes use of new and largely untapped resources for teaching and learning. It moves towards a new faith in the student, and his capacity for learning on his own, while at the same time providing close and continuing contact between the student and the teacher ... (p. 84)

ADULT LEARNERS AND THE TRANSITION PROCESS

Whether young or old, man or woman, energetic or apathetic, anxious or self-confident, adults returning to school alter their roles, routines, and relationships at home, in the educational setting, and in the community at large. They are undergoing a transition, an event or a non-event that changes their relationships, routines, and assumptions (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). For adult learners, the transition process consists of three main stages: moving into the learning environment, moving through it, and preparing to move on from it.

Moving into the learning environment typically presents little or no real problem for learners (after overcoming and becoming familiar with the rules). Moving through the learning environment, however, confronts learners with issues such as how to balance their academic activities with other social demands and how to feel supported and challenged during their learning journey. Thus, adult learners, particularly women, may require help to sustain their energy, determination, and commitment to learning.

According to Schlossberg et al. (1989), coping with transition involves four "S's": Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. Nursing mothers in the

University of Benin's part-time education program experienced what may be called "double transitions"—a transition within a transition. The first transition was moving from being a schoolteacher to being a student within a rigorous academic environment. The second was from being an expectant mother to being a nursing mother. Nursing mothers must balance academic activities with nursing their baby, and the mothers' needs and requirements are rarely met in teaching-learning arrangements. Indeed, caring for a child and a home constitutes not only an interruption to women's academic participation, but also a constraint on their social, political, and economic responsibilities.

The present study explored issues that affected the participation of nursing mothers in part-time higher education. The study group consisted of 19 nursing mothers who came, with their babies, to the 2004 contact session in the five departments of the Faculty of Education in the University of Benin. The study was based on the assumption that nursing mothers in part-time higher education are capable of effective participation in teaching-learning programs if adequate and affordable post-natal provisions are available to them within the University environment.

THE STUDY

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What special provisions for nursing mothers exist in the teaching-learning arrangements of the University of Benin's part-time education program?
2. Does nursing a baby affect academic participation?
3. What challenges do nursing mothers encounter in part-time higher education?
4. What arrangements could be made to facilitate the effective participation of nursing mothers in the part-time higher education program?

Objectives

- To assess institutional provisions for nursing mothers in the University of Benin's part-time education program
- To investigate the effect of nursing a baby on a woman's academic participation

- To recommend appropriate strategies and institutional arrangements for strengthening nursing mothers' participation in part-time higher education

Significance

This study deviated from traditional ways of examining quality, quantity, cost analysis, or enrolment trends of education. Instead, it focused on the problems and probable hindrances to learners' participation in teaching-learning activities. It also gave education planners and practitioners the opportunity to appreciate emerging trends in education and showcased the scope of issues faced by women seeking higher education. The outcome of this descriptive study could contribute to the reappraisal of the program-delivery model employed by universities offering part-time education programs in Nigeria.

Methods

A mix of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed to allow for the collection of detailed and relatively in-depth information on the teaching-learning arrangements of the University of Benin's part-time education program and to give a voice to the nursing mothers who participated in the study. Instruments included an open-type questionnaire, supplemented with unstructured interviews. The instrument was administered to the 19 nursing mothers enrolled in the University's 2004 part-time education program.

The questionnaire had two sections: Section A profiled the respondents; Section B examined the challenges of "mothering" and learning, including the provisions for nursing mothers in teaching-learning arrangements, the effect of nursing a baby on a woman's academic participation, and the major obstacles encountered by nursing mothers in the academic environment. The interview schedule was used to verify and confirm emerging issues. A simple percentage rating was used to compute the findings of the test items in the questionnaire.

Results

Data analysis was based on the completed questionnaires of the 19 nursing mothers participating in the part-time program.

Section A of the questionnaire revealed the following profile (see Table 1). Most respondents were married (from 6 to 10 years), were between 26 and 30 years of age, and were predominantly classroom teachers (18, or 94.7%). Thirteen respondents had from one to three children, while the remaining six had up to six children. Most respondents intended to have more children.

Table 1: *Pattern of response by variables of age, marital status, years of marriage, occupation, number of children, and desire for more children*

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
(a) Age		
21–25	4	21.1
26–30	12	63.2
31–35	3	15.7
Total	19	100.0
(b) Marital status		
Married	17	89.5
Separated	2	10.5
Single	-	-
Total	19	100.0
(c) Years of marriage		
1–5	8	42.1
6–10	9	47.4
11–15	2	10.5
Total	19	100.0
(d) Occupation		
Teaching	18	94.7
Civil service	1	5.3
Others	-	-
Total	19	100.0
(e) No. of children		
1–3	13	68.4
4–6	6	31.6
7–9	-	-
Total	19	100.0
(f) Desire for more children		
Yes	13	68.4
No	6	31.6
Undecided	-	-
Total	19	100.0

Source: Field study

Based on the participants' responses to the study's four research questions, Section B data was used to assess the ways in which the respondents managed their learning while nursing their babies.

Research Question 1:

What special provisions for nursing mothers exist in the teaching-learning arrangements of the University of Benin's part-time education program?

Table 2: Provisions for nursing mothers

Variable	Provisions		No provisions		Total	
		%		%		%
Number of courses registered	0	0	19	100	19	100
Teaching-learning arrangements	2	10.5	17	89.5	19	100
Time tabling	0	0	19	100	19	100
Duration of lectures	0	0	19	100	19	100
Daily academic activities	0	0	19	100	19	100
Provisions for babies	0	0	19	100	19	100

Source: Field study

Analysis of data in Table 2 showed that, for the entire set of variables measured, more than 80% of respondents claimed that, as nursing mothers, they received no special consideration. This suggested that nursing mothers faced the same rigours, pressures, and activities as all other students in the program.

Research Question 2:

Does nursing a baby affect academic participation?

Items 5 to 12 of the questionnaire gathered information on several issues, including respondents' previous experience of nursing a baby while attending school, how they coped with childcare during teaching-learning sessions, and how the age of the child affected their academic participation (e.g., in lectures, tutorials, and group discussions). As for previous experience of nursing a baby while attending school, 16 (84.2%) respondents had no experience of rearing a child during any of their previous academic involvement, and 3 (15.8%) had this experience. Caring for a baby during teaching-learning

ing sessions was reported to be a Herculean task: about 73.7% of respondents reported this caused them severe stress. The child’s age also affected respondents’ academic participation, and the younger the child, the greater the effect. Of those responding to this question, 13 had children younger than 12 months and 6 had children between one and two years of age.

Research Question 3:

What challenges do nursing mothers encounter in part-time higher education?

Table 3: *Participation in academic work*

Variable	Stressful		Not stressful		Total	
		%		%		%
Classroom attendance	15	78.9	4	21.1	19	100
Preparation for classwork	12	63.2	7	36.8	19	100
Participation in classwork	15	78.9	4	21.1	19	100
Class leadership	19	100	0	0	19	100
Daily academic programs	19	100	0	0	19	100
Other school activities	17	89.5	02	10.5	19	100

Source: Field study

The analysis of data in Table 3 showed that more than 60% of the nursing mothers in the part-time program met obstacles in all of the measured variables. It can therefore be inferred from their responses that the program did not meet the needs of most of these nursing mothers.

Research Question 4:

What arrangements could be made to facilitate the effective participation of nursing mothers in the part-time higher education program?

Data from Table 4 indicated that more than 60% of respondents believed that the program was in need of special arrangements and provisions for nursing mothers. Several commented that instituting even some of the identified provisions would improve their academic participation and general academic performance, which was just above average.

Table 4: *Arrangements for nursing mothers*

Possible accommodations	Frequency	%
Time tabling	17	89.5
Fewer daily activities	19	100
Baby time-out	19	100
Provision of daycare	16	84.2
Special grading system	12	63.2
Assessment in other domain of education	17	89.5
Provision of accommodation	19	100

Source: Field study

DISCUSSION

Nursing mothers were not exempt from the academic activities planned for other categories of students in the part-time higher education program. The study participants noted how their need to pamper, breast-feed, and stay up all night to attend to their infants typically coincided with their need to be engaged in one academic activity or another. As a result, they felt short-changed and burdened by their academic responsibilities. This situation affected their level of participation in the classroom and the rest of their academic work. This finding confirmed the view of Kasworm (1980), who stated that the curriculum and instructional-delivery systems of most continuing education programs fail to acknowledge the diversity of persons within their institutional mission. One major factor responsible for women's difficulty in coping with educational programs is the demanding domestic responsibilities placed on them by nature and by society (Kazeem, 1997).

The degree to which caring for a child affects academic participation is dependent upon both the age of the child and the mother's previous experience of nursing a child while attending school. Study participants who had previously attended a part-time education program while nursing a child found it easier to cope with the demands of academic work than those going through the experience for the first time. However, most of the participants who had children less than one year old reported experiencing severe difficulty with their studies, whether or not they had previous experience of childcare and schooling. This suggested that the younger the child, the greater the effect of caring for the child on a woman's ability to meet the demands of academic work.

The majority of respondents had difficulty participating in all of the variables measured by the study. They neither attended classes regularly nor had enough time to prepare for or participate in classwork. The duration of the daily academic program, which started as early as 7:00 am and went until 6:00 pm, left them no time to attend to other pressing activities, such as suckling their babies, or to become involved in leadership activities. For example, one respondent who was made a group leader had to vacate her position. Other challenges included having to leave class to breast-feed their babies, sleepless nights, attending to sick children, and baby-clinic days falling within the lecture/school period. All of these situations affected their active involvement in the classroom, as well as their other academic work. This finding is similar to the view of Daniel-Okei (1998), who found that a woman's homemaking role, coupled with her other duties performed within and outside the home, left little or no time to participate actively in literacy classes.

The nursing mothers who took part in this study suggested ways to help women like them participate more actively in higher education. Most believed that if time tabling, duration of daily academic activities, and course-delivery systems could be changed to be more accommodating to nursing mothers, then "half" of women's issues in higher education would be solved. For instance, respondents advocated for *baby time out* periods during school hours, that is, time set aside to breast-feed and care for their babies. Their other proposals included on-campus daycare centres, a special grading system that considers the limitations of nursing mothers, standardized course materials (given an apparent dearth of textbooks in various fields), assessment of other educational domains in examinations, and special on-campus facilities for nursing mothers. This result confirmed Curtis's (2004) position that institutions must introduce policy changes that will help people balance their family responsibilities with their academic studies. A first step would involve institutions taking a closer look at aspects of academic culture that have traditionally made such a balance difficult.

IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS

It is clear from this study that the University of Benin's part-time teaching-learning programs do not encourage the active and continuous involvement of nursing or expectant mothers. Although, for instance, the University allows students to apply for temporary withdrawal if they cannot cope with the academic demands of their program, many of the study participants were unaware of this policy. Those who were aware of the policy claimed that they did not have the financial resources to take advantage of it. Instead, study participants suggested that the institution should initiate changes that would

help women with children deal with the challenges and stress of trying to balance caring for their children with their academic studies.

University administrators need to examine, in a comprehensive manner, how to modify procedures, policies, instructional practices, time tabling, and provision of support services for special students like nursing mothers in part-time programs. The University must acknowledge the differences in the composition of learners at this level and the need to accommodate their varied needs.

To this end, University administrators must not only understand that nursing mothers require special attention but also accept the fact that they face many obstacles when trying to pursue an uninterrupted learning program. Thus, consideration should be given to changing academic time tables to include baby time outs, to reviewing daily academic programs to decrease learners' stress levels, and to providing counsellors to attend to women's issues, particularly the issue of managing childcare while learning.

CONCLUSION

Women's participation in higher education depends on the extent to which issues that plague women's uninterrupted participation have been considered. This study revealed that issues such as childcare had not received any special consideration in the delivery of the University of Benin's part-time education program. Improving access to education for expectant and nursing mothers would not only increase these women's professional and intellectual capacity but also increase the overall health of society. Improved educational opportunities for women improve their overall health statistics and decrease infant morbidity and mortality rates (World Health Organization, 2004). Therefore, University administrators are encouraged to review their present academic policies and procedures with a view to improving the participation of expectant and nursing mothers in part-time academic programs.

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BIOGRAPHY

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