



## Caregivers in the classroom: The cultural double bind of undergraduate student mothers at university of business and integrated development studies (UBIDS), Ghana

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of undergraduate student mothers at the University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS) in Wa, Ghana. Using Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model as a theoretical framework, the study examines how these women navigate the dual roles of motherhood and academic work. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 student mothers, data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis approach, supported by independent double-coding, member checking, and a reflexive journal to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness. The research reveals significant challenges including time management difficulties, role conflict, and inadequate institutional support, compounded by the unique demands of the university's Practical Training Programme (PTP). The findings also document the resilience and strategies these women employ to sustain their academic participation alongside the role of family and peer support. The study concludes with practical recommendations for creating mother-friendly academic environments, including on-campus childcare facilities, flexible attendance and examination policies, and dedicated student parent support services.

**Keywords:** Bronfenbrenner, Coping Strategies, Ghana, Higher Education, Non-Traditional Students, Role Conflict, Institutional Support, Student Mothers

### I. INTRODUCTION

Pursuing higher education carries the promise of personal development, professional growth, and improved socioeconomic status. Across the African continent, universities have expanded access through policies such as affirmative action admissions, targeted scholarships, and gender mainstreaming programmes. In Ghana specifically, the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act 2024 (Act 1121) now obliges public and private institutions to ensure equitable gender representation and access, including preferential admission measures for women (Faakye, 2025). Yet for a particular group of women, this journey is shadowed by complex challenges that the majority of institutional frameworks were not designed to address.

Globally, the presence of non-traditional students, including student mothers, in higher education has grown substantially (Kisanga & Matiba, 2023). Across very different national contexts such as Namibia, Iran, Uganda, and South Africa, the same challenges recur through role conflict, time constraints, financial pressure, and the absence of institutional support (Ashipala & Natanael, 2022; Behboodi Moghadam et al., 2017; Kubeka, 2016; Maluleke et al., 2023; Opit et al., 2020). This consistency suggests the problem is structural rather than local, a point developed further in the Literature Review. A consistent finding across these contexts is that coping mechanisms such as relying on family members, hiring babysitters, or reducing sleep are frequently inadequate substitutes for systematic institutional support.

In Ghana, a growing body of scholarship has begun to highlight the experiences of women in higher education, but to our knowledge only two published studies address Ghanaian student mothers directly, and both focus on postgraduate or distance-learning populations rather than undergraduates in face-to-face programmes (Dankyi et al., 2019; Akomaning & Osafo, 2021). This gap is consequential in that newly established institutions, by definition, lack the accumulated policy precedents and infrastructure of older universities, leaving student mothers without even the limited accommodations that may exist elsewhere.

The University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS), established in Wa in the Upper West Region of Ghana in 2019, represents precisely such an institution. Located in one of Ghana's most resource-constrained regions, UBIDS operates a trimester system that includes a distinctive Practical Training Programme

(PTP), a mandatory component of the undergraduate curriculum requiring all students to spend approximately six to eight weeks living and working in rural and peri-urban communities. This feature introduces challenges for student mothers that have no parallel in conventional campus-based programmes, and it recurs as a central thread through this study's findings.

Furthermore, the socio-cultural context of northern Ghana, where deeply held expectations about women's caregiving roles coexist with aspirations for women's educational advancement, creates what this study identifies as a cultural double bind: mothers are simultaneously expected to fulfil intensive caregiving roles and to advance educationally and economically. This dynamic is consistent with the broader pattern Nartey et al (2023) describe in their ecological review of Ghanaian gender norms, where caregiving expectations rooted in the home are reinforced across religious, educational, and economic institutions and ultimately sustained by macrosystem-level norms that treat caregiving as women's primary role regardless of their other commitments. Maisela and Ross (2018) document a related dynamic among undergraduate student mothers in South Africa, though that context differs from ours in country and, in part, in institutional setting. This cultural complexity takes on specific local dimensions at UBIDS that warrant empirical investigation.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Ghana's Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act 2024 (Act 1121) and earlier access-and-equity policies (Atuahene, 2008; Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013) have measurably increased women's entry into Ghanaian higher education, including into a new generation of institutions such as UBIDS. Faakye (2025) argues, however, that the Act's provisions remain concentrated on admission and representation rather than on the conditions under which women, once admitted, are able to remain and succeed. These interventions, however, have been largely gender-neutral rather than gender-responsive, failing to address the specific realities of women who are simultaneously mothers. This is not a hypothetical gap, as evidence from Namibia, Iran, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa consistently shows that student mothers experience significant role conflict and inadequate institutional support. Across these contexts, the absence of essential facilities, including childcare services and private breastfeeding spaces, further constrains their ability to balance motherhood and academic responsibilities (Ashipala & Natanael, 2022; Behboodi Moghadam et al., 2017; Kisanga & Matiba, 2023; Maluleke et al., 2023; Opit et al., 2020). Importantly, the recurrence of these challenges across nearly a decade of scholarship suggests that they represent persistent structural concerns rather than isolated or temporary difficulties.

Within Ghana specifically, the problem is compounded by an evidentiary gap. Existing Ghanaian scholarship on student mothers is confined to two studies, both concerned with postgraduate or distance-learning populations (Dankyi et al., 2019; Akomaning & Osafo, 2021). Neither speaks to the situation of undergraduate student mothers enrolled in face-to-face programmes, who are plausibly more vulnerable than their postgraduate or distance-learning counterparts. These undergraduates are typically younger, have less financial stability, are navigating their first extended experience of higher education, and are enrolled in programmes with less built-in flexibility. The problem is sharpened further at newly established institutions such as UBIDS, which by definition lack the accumulated policy precedents, facilities, and informal accommodations that older universities may have developed over time. UBIDS additionally operates a mandatory Practical Training Programme (PTP) requiring six to eight weeks of residential placement in rural and peri-urban communities. This is a structural feature with no equivalent in the studies reviewed above, and one whose implications for student mothers have not been documented anywhere in the literature.

The result is that a public university actively expanding access to women has no empirical basis for understanding whether, or how, that access translates into conditions under which student mothers can actually remain and succeed. This study addresses that gap by examining the specific challenges, coping strategies, and institutional support experienced by undergraduate student mothers at UBIDS, and by generating evidence-based recommendations to inform institutional policy.

### 1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To examine the challenges undergraduate student mothers at UBIDS face in balancing motherhood and academic work.
- ii. To explore the coping strategies and sources of family, peer, and social support that student mothers draw upon in managing their dual roles.
- iii. To assess the nature and adequacy of institutional support available to student mothers at UBIDS.
- iv. To identify student mothers' recommendations for a more inclusive, mother-friendly university environment.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

#### 2.1.1 Bronfenbrenner's PPCT Model

This study employs Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) as its main theoretical framework. The PPCT model offers a comprehensive ecological perspective that is well-suited to understanding the complex, multi-layered experiences of student mothers. Rather than locating challenges primarily within individuals, the model situates human development within dynamic interactions between individuals and their multiple environments. The process component refers to proximal processes, which Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) define as the primary engines of development: interactions that occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time, and whose power to shape outcomes increases with their complexity and reciprocity. For student mothers, these include interactions with lecturers and peers in academic settings, caregiving interactions with their children, and domestic interactions within the household. The quality, frequency, and nature of these proximal processes significantly shape outcomes for both mothers and children, which is why the sustained, day-to-day character of these interactions is central to how this study interprets participants' accounts.

The person component encompasses individual characteristics that Bronfenbrenner distinguishes as resource characteristics, such as skills, experience, and socioeconomic resources, and force characteristics, such as motivation, persistence, and resilience. These characteristics are not fixed; they are themselves shaped by experiences and interactions over time. Student mothers' personal resilience, their motivations for pursuing education, and their resources for managing dual roles all influence how they engage with their environments and the outcomes they achieve.

The context component encompasses multiple nested ecological systems including the microsystem (immediate settings such as the classroom and home), the mesosystem (connections between settings), the exosystem (settings that affect the individual indirectly, such as university policy), and the macrosystem (broader cultural values and norms). The PPCT model is particularly valuable for this study because it directs attention to how cultural norms about motherhood (macrosystem), university policies on attendance and facilities (exosystem), connections between family and academic life (mesosystem), and immediate classroom conditions (microsystem) all interact to shape the student mother's experience. The Findings and Discussion sections that follow are organised in part around these four nested levels, tracing how student mothers' experiences are shaped at each.

The time component, or chronosystem, acknowledges that experiences and circumstances change over time and that life transitions have lasting developmental effects. This study's cross-sectional, single-interview design means the chronosystem is engaged here primarily as an interpretive lens rather than as a dimension analysed longitudinally: participants' accounts reflect a single point in their educational and parenting trajectories, and comparisons across time would require repeated data collection that falls outside the scope of the present study. Within this constraint, the chronosystem remains relevant in one respect: participants' accounts frequently referenced the cyclical demands of the academic calendar, particularly the recurrence of examinations and the fixed timing of the Practical Training Programme, both of which recur predictably regardless of a child's needs in a given trimester. This recurring mismatch between fixed institutional timelines and unpredictable caregiving demands is addressed further in the Discussion. Future longitudinal research, as noted in the Conclusion, would be needed to examine how these dynamics evolve as children age and as women progress through their studies.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

#### 2.2.1 Challenges in Balancing Motherhood and Academic Work

The foundational literature on non-traditional students dates to Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional undergraduate attrition, which first drew attention to the distinct pressures facing students whose lives extend beyond the campus. Within this broader category, caregiving demands fall disproportionately on mothers rather than fathers (Kisanga & Matiba, 2023), producing a specific and recurring pattern of difficulty across very different national settings. Ashipala and Natanael (2022), studying nursing and midwifery student mothers in Namibia, found that role conflict was compounded by an absence of facilities suited to student mothers' needs. Behboodi Moghadam et al. (2017) reported that Iranian student mothers experienced conflicting demands, financial difficulty, social stigma, and self-neglect, indicating that the pattern is not confined to African settings. In South Africa, Maisela and Ross (2018) argued that academic structures such as coursework deadlines are built around a student free of caregiving obligations, disadvantaging student mothers by design rather than oversight, while Maluleke et al. (2023) described the experience of reconciling dual roles as "a walk on a tight rope."

A further, more specific strand of this literature concerns the conflict between caregiving and placement-type or practical components of a programme, which speaks directly to UBIDS's Practical Training Programme (PTP). Bogossian (2021), studying student-mothers in Scotland, found that mothers were frequently unable to complete

mandatory practical or placement hours because these components assumed a caregiver-free student, forcing some to alter their course choices entirely to accommodate caregiving obligations. Although Bogossian's context (a UK university) differs sharply from UBIDS's in both country and institutional character, the underlying mechanism has not previously been documented for a Ghanaian institution, and is one this study is positioned to examine empirically for the first time in relation to PTP specifically.

### **2.2.2 Coping Strategies and Sources of Family, Peer, and Social Support**

A second body of literature addresses how student mothers manage these demands day to day. Kisanga and Matiba (2023) found that Tanzanian student-mothers' coping strategies are predominantly problem-focused rather than emotion-focused, and that these strategies frequently substitute for, rather than supplement, absent institutional structures. A recent narrative review by Azuka and Hildayani (2024), synthesising seven studies on role conflict in student mothers, similarly distinguishes problem-focused coping (planful problem-solving, seeking instrumental support) from emotion-focused coping (self-control, positive reappraisal, seeking emotional support), and finds that student mothers typically draw on both, with instrumental support from family emerging as the single most consistently reported coping resource across studies.

The centrality of family and peer support specifically is well documented outside the higher-education literature as well as within it. Opit et al. (2020), studying breastfeeding student mothers at Kyambogo University in Uganda, found that the absence of on-site childcare pushed mothers toward informal, largely female kin networks to manage feeding schedules around lecture timetables. A South African dissertation-based study (Maisela & Ross, 2018) of fifteen undergraduate student mothers similarly found that participants experienced significant financial, social, and emotional strain but were able to persist chiefly through the support of family and friends, concluding that this reliance on informal networks carries direct implications for how universities might formalise support rather than leave it to chance. More broadly, research on informal support networks among mothers in resource-constrained Southern African settings (e.g., studies of mother-headed households) consistently identifies three recurring sources as functioning as substitutes for absent formal provision, a pattern this study's Themes 5 and 6 were positioned to test against the specific case of undergraduate student mothers at a young Ghanaian university.

### **2.2.3 Institutional Support for Student Mothers**

A third strand examines the adequacy of institutional responses. The consistent finding across the literature is one of absence rather than inadequate design: institutions have often simply not built policy for this population. Nkrumah and Gbagbo (2018), in what appears to be the first published Ghanaian study to examine institutional support for student mothers directly, found that the University of Education, Winneba had no formal system to support breastfeeding student mothers; nursing mothers relied on trees, lobbies, and common rooms as makeshift lactation sites, exposing infants to infection risk and compounding maternal stress. This finding is significant for the present study in two respects: first, it demonstrates that the absence of institutional accommodation for student mothers in Ghana is not confined to newly established institutions such as UBIDS but appears even at a long-established teacher-training university; and second, it means the evidentiary gap in Ghanaian scholarship on student mothers is narrower than previously characterised, though it remains confined to a single, older, non-PTP institution and does not address undergraduate face-to-face experience broadly.

Beyond Ghana, Mwangi-Chemnjor's (2012) study of parenthood policy in a Kenyan public university found that institutional handbooks in several cases treated pregnancy as fundamentally incompatible with continued residence and academic participation. He reported that some required students to vacate halls of residence months before delivery, an extreme instance of the gender-neutral, non-responsive policy environment that Faakye (2025) critiques in the Ghanaian case. Kakuru (2022), examining student motherhood in a precarious urban Ugandan context, similarly found that institutional structures assumed a student unencumbered by dependants, leaving student mothers to informally negotiate accommodations with individual lecturers rather than through codified policy. This is a dynamic that resonates closely with this study's later finding (Theme 2) that examination accommodations at UBIDS depend on which staff member a student happens to encounter, rather than on a formal policy.

### **2.2.4 Recommendations for Mother-Friendly University Environments**

Literature that moves from documenting the problem to proposing institutional remedies remains comparatively thin, particularly for face-to-face undergraduate contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa, but a consistent set of recommendations recurs across the studies reviewed above and in the broader student-parent literature. On-campus or campus-adjacent childcare is the most frequently recommended intervention (Akomaning & Osafo, 2021; Nkrumah & Gbagbo, 2018); in higher-resource settings, the US Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) programme, discussed by Reichlin Cruse (2021), offers one model of institutional grant-funded, campus-based childcare targeted specifically at low-income student-parents, illustrating what a resourced version of Theme 7's

demand for on-campus childcare can look like, even though direct transfer to a resource-constrained Ghanaian context would need adaptation. Formalised, codified attendance and examination accommodation policies are recommended by Kakuru (2022) and implicit in Faakye's (2025) broader argument that gender-equity legislation needs to extend from admission to retention. A designated point of institutional contact or coordinating office for student parents is recommended by Akomaning and Osafo (2021), who called specifically for dedicated counselling services following their finding that student mothers absorbed extensive unrecognised domestic labour alongside their studies. None of the reviewed studies, however, addresses recommendations specific to a mandatory residential placement requirement analogous to PTP, leaving this as an area where the present study's Theme 7 findings appear to be without precedent in the published literature.

### **2.2.5 Synthesis: The Ghanaian Gap Revisited**

Read together, the literature reviewed above supports three conclusions that motivate the present study. First, the challenges, coping patterns, and institutional gaps documented for student mothers are strikingly consistent across otherwise very different national and institutional contexts suggesting a structural rather than local problem, as the Introduction argues. Second, within Ghana specifically, the small existing literature (Dankyi et al., 2019; Akomaning & Osafo, 2021; and, on the narrower question of institutional breastfeeding support, Nkrumah & Gbagbo, 2018) is concentrated on postgraduate, distance-learning, or single-issue (lactation) populations at long-established institutions, and has not examined the lived, day-to-day experience of undergraduate student mothers in face-to-face programmes at a newly established university. Third, no study identified in this review has examined how a mandatory, multi-week residential field placement of the kind represented by UBIDS's Practical Training Programme intersects with student motherhood. This combination of gaps is what the present study is positioned to address.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design and Approach**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, guided by an interpretivist epistemological position (Creswell, 2009; Babbie, 2016). Qualitative methodology was selected because student mothers' strategies for reconciling caregiving and academic demands are shaped by meanings, relationships, and circumstances that a structured survey instrument would not adequately capture. The interpretivist approach allowed the researchers to engage with participants' own constructions of their experiences and the meanings they attributed to them (Silverman, 2017).

### **3.2 Study Area**

The study was conducted at the University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS) in Wa, in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Established in 2019, UBIDS is a young public university that serves a diverse student population, including a notable number of non-traditional students. The Upper West Region is among Ghana's most resource-constrained, and UBIDS's mandatory trimester-based Practical Training Programme (PTP) requires students to spend six to eight weeks living and working in rural and peri-urban communities across the region, a feature with direct relevance to student mothers' experiences that is examined in detail in the Findings.

### **3.3 Target Population**

The target population comprised undergraduate student mothers actively experiencing the dual challenges of motherhood and academic work at UBIDS. Student mothers are enrolled across multiple programmes including B.Ed. English, Basic Education, Business Education, Urban Planning, Social Science Education, and Hospitality and Tourism Management. Institution-wide figures on the number or proportion of non-traditional students or student mothers were not available from student affairs or registry records at the time of writing, which is itself indicative of the limited institutional attention this population has so far received.

### **3.4 Sampling Technique and Sample Size**

The study adopted purposive sampling, a non-probability technique appropriate for qualitative research seeking participants with specific, relevant characteristics (Campbell et al., 2020). The idea for this study originated during examination invigilation duties, when two members of the research team, who are lecturers at UBIDS, observed challenges faced by student mothers and decided to investigate them further. These lecturers subsequently contacted some student mothers directly and explained the purpose of the study to them. Contacted student mothers then referred the research team to other student mothers, following a snowball sampling approach. The majority of participants were drawn from the School of Education and Life-Long Learning. Whether any eligible women declined to participate was not systematically recorded.

A total of fifteen (15) student mothers participated in the study. Recruitment continued until the research team judged that no substantially new codes were emerging from the final interviews reviewed against the existing coding framework, consistent with recommendations for thematic saturation in similarly bounded qualitative studies (Elo et al., 2014). Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Codes and Characteristics*

| Code | Level / Programme                              | Number and Ages of Children      | Marital Status    |
|------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| SM1  | Level 300 / B.Ed English Language              | One (1 year 5 months)            | Married           |
| SM2  | Level 300 / B.Ed English Language              | Two (4 years, 6 months)          | Married           |
| SM3  | Level 300 / B.Ed English Language              | Four (last one 3 months)         | Married           |
| SM4  | Level 300 / B.Ed English Language              | Two (4 years, 6 months)          | Married           |
| SM5  | Level 100 / Urban Planning                     | Four (18, 12, 7, 2 years)        | Married           |
| SM6  | Level 300 / Social Science Education           | One (1 year 3 months)            | Single            |
| SM7  | Level 300 / B.Ed English Language              | One (1 year 5 months)            | Married           |
| SM8  | Level 300 / B.Ed English Language              | One (3 months)                   | Married           |
| SM9  | Level 100 / Basic Education                    | One (1 year 6 months)            | Married           |
| SM10 | Level 100 / Basic Education                    | One (1 year 7 months)            | Married           |
| SM11 | Level 200 / Business Education (Mgt & English) | Three (11, 10, 1.5 years)        | Married           |
| SM12 | Level 100 / Hospitality & Tourism Mgt          | One (1.5 years)                  | In a relationship |
| SM13 | Level 100 / B.Ed English                       | Two (4 years, 2 years)           | Married           |
| SM14 | Level 100 / B.Ed English                       | Two (4 years, 2 years)           | Married           |
| SM15 | Level 300 / B.Ed English                       | Two (2 years 5 months, 3 months) | Married           |

### 3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using an interview guide developed from the study's research objectives. The guide was piloted with five student mothers at the university, drawn from two faculties not involved in the actual study: the School of Law (two participants) and the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (three participants). Following the pilot interviews, some items were reworded for clarity. The guide included open-ended questions on daily routines, role conflict, coping strategies, institutional support, and recommendations for improvement, with prompts to facilitate detailed, reflective responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). A research assistant with prior qualitative research experience and personal experience as a student mother conducted the interviews, which were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were conducted in English; no translation was required. Interviews lasted approximately 40 to 50 minutes. Data collection took place between 10 October and 10 November 2025.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-phase thematic analysis approach: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Two members of the research team independently coded transcripts to enhance credibility, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus (Elo et al., 2014). The trustworthiness of the analysis was further strengthened through member checking: five participants reviewed a summary of the emergent themes after data analysis was completed. The research team also maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to track how the research assistant's own experience as a student mother may have shaped rapport and disclosure, and used thick description of the research context to enable readers to assess transferability.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at UBIDS prior to data collection. All participants gave informed consent, were assured that participation was voluntary and that declining or withdrawing would have no bearing on their academic standing, and were informed of their right to skip any question or end the interview at any point. Because two members of the research team were lecturers at UBIDS who identified this issue through their examination invigilation duties and subsequently recruited some participants directly, particular care was taken to separate recruitment from any assessment role, and participants were explicitly assured that their decision to take part would not affect their grades. Participant anonymity was protected throughout through the use of alphanumeric codes (SM1–SM15) in place of names, and identifying contextual details have been minimised in the reporting of findings below.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Findings

The analysis of the field data generated seven interrelated themes, summarised in Table 2. The first three themes (daily struggles, role conflict, and academic constraints) speak primarily to Objective (i); Themes 5 and 6 (coping strategies and family/social support) speak to Objective (ii); Theme 4 (institutional support) speaks to Objective (iii); and Theme 7 (recommendations) speaks to Objective (iv). Each is discussed in turn below, with verbatim excerpts identified by participant code, interview format, and interview date.

**Table 2**

*Summary of Interrelated Themes Emerging from the Thematic Analysis*

| No. | Theme                                          |
|-----|------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Daily Struggles and Time Management Challenges |
| 2   | Role Conflict and Competing Demands            |
| 3   | Academic Performance and Learning Constraints  |
| 4   | Inadequate Institutional Support Systems       |
| 5   | Coping Strategies and Resilience               |
| 6   | Family and Social Support Networks             |
| 7   | Recommendations for Institutional Change       |

#### Theme 1: Daily Struggles and Time Management Challenges

Student mothers described their daily lives as characterised by relentless demands and exhausting responsibilities. Waking at 4:00 or 5:00 AM to prepare meals, bathe and dress children, and arrange childcare before travelling to campus was the norm rather than the exception. Even this considerable advance preparation often proved insufficient. One participant, a Level 100 B.Ed English student with two young children, vividly captured the reality of morning routines:

*"It's not easy. Because you have to wake up very early and then prepare the first one to go to school. Going for lectures many at times, I may not go early, I may go maybe 30 minutes after the normal time. I can wake up at 5:00 am but sometimes I can still go to class late."* (SM14, Field Interview, 7 November 2025)

The unpredictability of young children's behaviour was a recurring theme. The same participant explained:

*"She will be running around here and I will be shouting 'come', she won't even mind me, all the time they want to be playing."* (SM14, Field Interview, 7 November 2025)

This unpredictability meant that time management strategies that might work on ordinary days would fail on days when children were unwell, uncooperative, or needed additional care. The same participant articulated the prioritisation logic that governed her days:

*"You have to do housework, you have to also go for lectures so most at times the housework can always wait because you are going to close and come... But classes cannot wait, education cannot wait."* (SM14, Field Interview, 7 November 2025)

This consistent prioritisation of academic obligations over domestic ones came at a cost participants described in terms of accumulating housework and compromised domestic standards, though most participants did not elaborate on the emotional weight of this trade-off in detail.

#### Theme 2: Role Conflict and Competing Demands

Role conflict emerged as one of the most consistent and acute challenges described by participants. Conflicts arose across a range of situations such as during examinations, during evening lectures, during medical appointments for children, and particularly during the Practical Training Programme (PTP). Perhaps the most striking account of role conflict came from a participant who had delivered her second child only days before examinations began:

*"I delivered her only a few days before exams started. My womb had not healed. And then he [the exam officer] secured an office for me. I wrote my exams. If it's another university, I may not be given that privilege."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

This account reveals both the severity of role conflict that can arise when biological and institutional timelines collide, and the crucial role that individual administrative actors can play in creating accommodations that policy has not formalised. The participant expressed deep gratitude for this informal accommodation, recognising it as exceptional rather than standard. Examination conditions without such accommodation were described as deeply challenging. Where SM15 received a discretionary accommodation, another participant recounted sitting a mid-trimester examination with no such support, while her child demanded attention throughout:

*"I was writing while he was there, disturbing me. Because of what he was doing, I was holding him one hand and I was writing the other hand. And because of that, I didn't finish before time. And because it's*

*institution, everybody is equal. So the lecturer cannot give me extra time to write."* (SM10, Field Interview, 29 October 2025)

The contrast between these two accounts is instructive: the same institution produced both an exceptional accommodation and its complete absence, depending on which individual staff member a student encountered. This suggests that support at UBIDS currently operates through discretion rather than policy. Evening classes, which ran from 5:30 to 7:30 PM, created a different form of conflict for mothers responsible for family meal preparation. One participant explained:

*"We had a lecture in the evening. And at that time too, I was supposed to be in the house cooking. For the family. So, it was, it clashes and it was difficult."* (SM14, Field Interview, 7 November 2025)

The PTP intensified role conflicts considerably by requiring students to be present in rural communities for extended periods. One participant described travelling to a remote rural community with a three-month-old infant, navigating inadequate sanitation facilities, the absence of a nearby clinic, and poor housing conditions:

*"My challenge was that if this child should fall sick, there's no clinic nearby. It means I have to walk a long way, and I don't have means. How am I going to back this child and walk that far? So I was always praying that God would help me so that this child will not fall sick."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

Beyond these logistical and institutional pressures, at least one participant also described direct social judgement for combining motherhood with study, distinct from the practical hardships described above. Asked what society expected of her as a mother and as a student, she recounted:

*"Sometimes they will always blame you, that you caused all this, that if you had taken a distance course you would not be suffering like that... Some blame you: you have a child, why did you get admission to this school? When you know you can't take care of the baby, why did you involve other responsibility to yourself again? Even some of our colleagues, they will blame you."* (SM10, Field Interview, 29 October 2025)

### Theme 3: Academic Performance and Learning Constraints

The cumulative effect of time pressure, disrupted sleep, and constant caregiving demands on academic performance was a theme that ran through virtually all interviews. Student mothers consistently described circumstances that compromised both their in-class learning and their independent study time. Classroom disruptions were a daily reality for mothers who brought children to lectures. One participant described missing key instructional content:

*"Sometimes they will be teaching and will be disturbing, making noise and crying and other things. So sometimes I do miss some key points of the lesson."* (SM9, Field Interview, 27 October 2025)

When disruptions became unmanageable, mothers were compelled to leave:

*"When it's too much that I can't control, I have to go out."* (SM9, Field Interview, 27 October 2025)

Independent study time was severely affected by caregiving demands. One participant described her experience:

*"This little voice is crying. So the time you want to concentrate, he wants to suckle. The time you think you need to learn, the other one too will get up and stand... So you leave the academia at that instant and attend to the family. And even the grades or your academic achievement, you may not meet it because you are not having enough time to really do serious studies. Maybe my expectation was that at the end of this course I would get A+, I had B+."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

Sleeplessness was identified as a significant learning constraint. One participant explained:

*"Sometimes the sleepless nights, maybe you want to wake up and read. You look and this child is crying. So the time to learn is not there."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

A language student whose programme required extensive reading described a similar constraint on her academic passion:

*"I need to do a lot of reading. And that has always been my passion too, but I don't get that time to read as I want."* (SM14, Field Interview, 7 November 2025)

### Theme 4: Inadequate Institutional Support Systems

The absence of institutional support specifically designed for student mothers was a consistent finding. While participants generally expressed appreciation for the tolerance shown by individual lecturers and the university's informal policy of not excluding children from classrooms, they were equally consistent in identifying the absence of any structural support systems. When asked directly about facilities for student mothers, responses were unambiguous:

*"Well, there are no facilities. There are no facilities that help student mothers. The classroom environment itself was not designed with mothers in mind. We go and sit at the back of the classroom. So that when the child is disturbing, you can easily walk out."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

This informal adaptation illustrated how student mothers had internalised the absence of formal accommodation. The absence of private spaces for breastfeeding compounded these difficulties. One participant explained:

*"When you want to breastfeed the child, it's not good to just move your breast like that, and everybody is watching. We are having classes around hall four. There is no any private place that you go and see yourself or even go to toilet like that."* (SM11, Field Interview, 31 October 2025)

One participant described being caught in the rain during a lecture break with no shelter available for her and her infant, and being forced to wait it out on an unlocked veranda with the child on the floor beside her — an account that illustrates concretely how the absence of designated space extended even to basic weather protection. Rigid attendance policies emerged as a particular institutional barrier. One participant eloquently articulated the conflict between institutional requirements and the realities of motherhood:

*"I am a nursing mother, so the attendance... I am to go for weighing, I am to go for injection, today is injection day, they are going to inject him three times so there is no way I can come for the lecture. If they can really minimise the strictness on attendance, it would really help the nursing mothers."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

The absence of any formal counselling or support service for student mothers was also noted. One participant with three children, who had faced an emotionally devastating situation when her youngest child required surgery, lamented:

*"I wish there was someone that I can go or an office you can go there and then lay your problem to them. There was no inner source like that."* (SM11, Field Interview, 31 October 2025)

Notably, participants tempered their criticism with gratitude for what accommodations did exist informally. The tolerance of lecturers was repeatedly cited:

*"The lecturers are a bit helping. If not, once the child is disturbing and they are not saying anything or they just understand the situation, I think they've been helping me."* (SM9, Field Interview, 27 October 2025)

This contextualised gratitude reflects the low baseline of expectation these women held regarding institutional support.

### Theme 5: Coping Strategies and Resilience

Despite overwhelming challenges, participants demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness and resilience. Their coping strategies operated across temporal, domestic, academic, and psychological dimensions. Proactive time management and advance preparation were the most commonly described strategies. One participant explained her approach to meal preparation:

*"I prepare enough soup so that maybe when I come, I will just prepare something little with the soup to eat."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

Another described batching domestic tasks:

*"When I'm going to class in the evening, like three, and I know I'll close at somewhere 5:30, so I come and prepare food... I'll do part of the job so that when I come, it will be very easy for me."* (SM9, Field Interview, 27 October 2025)

Maximising brief windows of opportunity for study was a universal strategy. One participant with a breastfeeding infant vividly described her approach:

*"The strategy is that I should learn at the little chance I get. So, the little chance he sleeps, I should also learn."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

She added, pointedly:

*"Having a child, doesn't mean that my script will be marked differently."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

This recognition that institutional assessment makes no concessions to student motherhood functioned both as a source of stress and as motivation. Spiritual coping resources were explicitly invoked by several participants. One participant described:

*"Sometimes I just pray and give the rest to God. Then take my books and study, for my studies I don't joke with my studies."* (SM12, Field Interview, 3 November 2025)

Another participant attributed her ability to persevere through community fieldwork to prayer:

*"I was always praying that God would help me so that this child will not fall sick."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

Motivation rooted in aspirations for children's futures provided powerful psychological sustenance. One participant, orphaned at eleven, articulated her purpose clearly:

*"My reason was that I will make it however it is, I will try my best to make it so that my child will never suffer like how I suffered."* (SM12, Field Interview, 3 November 2025)

This forward-looking orientation transformed present hardship into meaningful investment. On campus, creative adaptations included carrying portable baby beds. One participant described:

*"I normally walk with a small bed in my bag. It's very flat. It's a small one. So I'll just spread it and take the baby."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

During examinations, she enlisted a recently graduated young woman to hold the child outside the examination venue. These informal, improvised solutions filled the gap left by absent institutional support.

#### Theme 6: Family and Social Support Networks

Family support, particularly from spouses, was one of the most consistently cited mediating factors between the challenges of student motherhood and participants' ability to remain in education. However, the nature, extent, and reliability of support varied considerably across participants.

Several participants described highly supportive spouses. One noted:

*"My husband, when it is assignment, or when it is anything about my academics, goes and buys, anything, he's very supportive. He will come and I will look for a place for him to sit and he will hold the child and I will enter and write."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

Peer and community support was notable during the PTP:

*"Any other thing they were doing, I was always with them. Maybe when I moved, when I'm tired, then some of them would pick the child. When this one is tired, the other one will also collect. They did very well."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

However, spousal support was frequently constrained by work arrangements and cultural expectations. Several participants noted that husbands who were rural teachers or otherwise employed were absent during weekdays and available only on weekends. One participant described herself as "more or less like a single parent" due to her husband's unstable presence. Extended family members provided supplementary childcare in some cases. One participant left her child with her sister in a neighbouring area when attending lectures:

*"Sometimes when I'm coming and she's around, I always send the child to my sister's place."* (SM9, Field Interview, 27 October 2025)

The informal nature of such support meant it was neither reliable nor comprehensive.

#### Theme 7: Recommendations for Institutional Change

When invited to suggest how universities could better support them, participants offered specific, practical, and consistent recommendations, several of which are revisited as priorities for institutional action in the Conclusion. The most frequently mentioned need was an on-campus childcare facility. Participants described their vision for such a facility in concrete terms:

*"If there is a structure put up for kids and their nannies to be there. So that after academic work you go for them."* (SM14, Field Interview, 7 November 2025)

Another elaborated:

*"Maybe it will just be a small room with maybe a normal room... a small room that can contain children, maybe three, four... we'll be very happy, and we'll thank him."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

A practical benefit was also envisioned:

*"I know more mothers who may even like to come to university because that is a place that they can keep their children. It can increase their enrolment."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

Flexibility in attendance policy was the second most prominent recommendation:

*"If they can really minimise the strictness on attendance, it would really help the nursing mothers. So that at least as a nursing mother if you have a genuine case, oh I want to go for weighing, maybe they will give you that permission."* (SM15, Field Interview, 10 November 2025)

One participant proposed distance learning options as an alternative:

*"Maybe they can offer distance course on Saturday and Sunday, you will not be disturbed that much."* (SM10, Field Interview, 29 October 2025)

The need for a dedicated support person or office was also clearly articulated:

*"If there's a place or you know that this is the coordinator of this, at least you can move to that person... because the person is also a human being and more to the point, a parent."* (SM11, Field Interview, 31 October 2025)

## 4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study, interpreted through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, reveal a coherent picture of how student mothers at UBIDS experience the interaction of proximal processes, personal characteristics, nested ecological contexts, and time-bound institutional rhythms. At the level of proximal processes, the day-to-day interactions described in Themes 1 through 3 align closely with the pattern Kisanga and Matiba (2023) describe

among Tanzanian student mothers, whose coping strategies were similarly organised around compensating, moment to moment, for institutional structures that assumed a caregiver-free student. The present study extends this picture by documenting how such compensation operates specifically within a trimester system with a residential fieldwork component (the PTP), a structural feature absent from the Tanzanian, Namibian, Iranian, and South African studies reviewed above. Where Ashipala and Natanael (2022) found that Namibian nursing student mothers experienced role conflict compounded by facility gaps, this study's Theme 4 findings suggest that at UBIDS the facility gap is close to total: no childcare space, no designated breastfeeding area, and no coordinating office exists at all, rather than existing in a limited or inconsistent form. This is a difference in degree from the contexts previously studied, and it is consistent with this study's contention that a newly established institution lacks the accumulated infrastructure that older universities may have developed.

The person-level finding that resilience, spiritual coping, and forward-looking motivation (Theme 5) sustained participants' persistence corroborates Maluleke et al.'s (2023) South African finding that individual resourcefulness, rather than institutional design, was what allowed student mothers to remain enrolled. The present findings, however, complicate a purely individual-resilience narrative: participants in this study were explicit that their coping strategies were necessary substitutes for absent support rather than freely chosen approaches, echoing Maisela and Ross's (2018) argument that academic structures are tailored to a caregiver-free student by design. The discretionary examination accommodation described by one participant (SM15), contrasted against another participant's account of sitting an examination with no accommodation at all (SM10), illustrates this study's central finding with particular clarity: support at UBIDS currently depends on which individual staff member a student happens to encounter, not on institutional policy. This finding qualifies the more general claim in the literature that institutional support is simply "inadequate" (e.g., Behboodi Moghadam et al., 2017); at UBIDS specifically, the problem is not only inadequate support but inconsistent support, which arguably compounds the unpredictability student mothers already face in balancing caregiving and study.

At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, the findings substantiate Nartey et al. (2023) ecological account of Ghanaian gender norms, in which caregiving expectations rooted in the home are reinforced, rather than counterbalanced, by educational institutions. The direct social blame one participant (SM10) described facing from peers for combining motherhood with study is a specific, first-hand illustration of the macrosystem-level dynamic Nartey et al. describe in the abstract; this study contributes an empirical instance where that literature had previously offered a broader structural account. This finding also extends the Ghanaian literature specifically: neither Dankyi et al. (2019) nor Akomaning and Osafo (2021), studying postgraduate and distance-learning student mothers respectively, documented comparable peer-level social blame, which may be because distance and postgraduate study involve less continuous, face-to-face peer contact than the undergraduate, campus-based context examined here.

Finally, the chronosystem dimension of the PPCT model helps explain why the PTP emerged as such a distinctive stressor in this study's findings, in a way it could not have in the studies reviewed in the Literature Review, none of which examined a comparable residential fieldwork requirement. The recurring, fixed timing of the PTP and of examination periods, irrespective of a child's needs in a given trimester, produced a structural mismatch between institutional and caregiving timelines that participants described managing through improvisation — portable beds, informal community support, prayer — rather than through any institutional accommodation. This is the clearest point at which the present study's findings diverge from, and add empirical specificity to, the broader pattern documented in the existing literature: the same underlying tension between fixed institutional timelines and unpredictable caregiving demands recurs across the studies reviewed above, but the PTP's residential, off-campus character intensifies it in ways specific to UBIDS's institutional design. Taken together, these findings suggest that student mothers' difficulties at UBIDS are not primarily a matter of individual capacity or motivation but of a structural mismatch between an institution built around the assumption of a caregiver-free student and the realities of women managing both roles simultaneously. This interpretation is consistent with, and adds Ghanaian undergraduate-specific evidence to, the cross-national literature reviewed above.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to examine the challenges, coping strategies, institutional support, and recommendations of undergraduate student mothers at UBIDS. In relation to Objective (i), the findings show that student mothers face pervasive time pressure, role conflict, and academic constraints stemming from the collision of caregiving and academic demands, intensified by structural features specific to UBIDS such as the mandatory Practical Training Programme and rigid attendance requirements. In relation to Objective (ii), participants drew on proactive time management, spiritual coping resources, forward-looking motivation, and family and peer support networks to sustain their academic participation, though these strategies functioned as improvised substitutes for institutional support

rather than as adequate alternatives to it. In relation to Objective (iii), the study found that institutional support at UBIDS is minimal, informal, and inconsistent: it currently depends on the discretion of individual lecturers and administrators rather than on codified policy, producing markedly different experiences for otherwise similarly situated students. In relation to Objective (iv), participants offered clear, consistent, and practical recommendations, centred on childcare provision, attendance flexibility, and a dedicated point of institutional contact.

Read together, these findings indicate that student motherhood at UBIDS is best understood not as an individual accommodation problem but as a structural mismatch between an institution designed around a caregiver-free student and the lived realities of women fulfilling both roles simultaneously. This conclusion is consistent with, and extends to the Ghanaian undergraduate context, the pattern of findings reported in comparable studies from Namibia, Iran, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Africa reviewed in this paper.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions above, the following recommendations are directed at UBIDS management and, where noted, at national policymakers.

First, UBIDS should establish a designated childcare space on campus, even on a modest scale, to be staffed during core lecture hours. This recommendation follows directly from the near-total absence of such facilities documented in Theme 4 and the explicit, repeated requests for this provision documented in Theme 7.

Second, the university should formalise attendance and examination accommodation policies for nursing and student mothers, converting the currently discretionary practices documented in Theme 2 (illustrated by the contrast between SM15's and SM10's examination experiences) into a codified policy that does not depend on which individual staff member a student encounters.

Third, UBIDS should designate a specific staff contact point, such as a Dean of Students office, to whom student mothers can bring PTP-related and other concerns, addressing the absence of any coordinating office identified in Theme 4 and requested directly in Theme 7.

Fourth, the university should review PTP placement and support arrangements for student mothers, particularly regarding proximity to healthcare facilities, in light of the specific risks documented in Theme 2 for mothers of infants and young children placed in remote rural communities.

Fifth, at a policy level, the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission and the Ministry of Education should consider extending the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act 2024 (Act 1121) beyond admissions-stage provisions to explicitly address the retention-stage needs of student parents, given this study's finding that access-focused policy alone does not address the conditions under which admitted student mothers are able to remain and succeed.

Future research should extend this inquiry longitudinally, tracking how student mothers' experiences evolve as their children grow and as they progress through their programmes, and should examine whether the patterns identified here at UBIDS are shared by newly established universities elsewhere in Ghana that similarly lack accumulated institutional infrastructure for this population.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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