



# Challenges of Student Mothers in Higher Education

A Narrative Literature Review  
of Sub-Saharan Africa Context

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## Keywords

Student mothers, higher education, Sub-Saharan Africa, academic challenges, financial challenges, social challenges

## Abstract

Student mothers pursuing higher education face multiple challenges, including in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Despite the challenges they encounter, limited comprehensive review has been done on academic, social and economic challenges they experience while pursuing their studies in higher education in SSA. This study was guided by Role Strain Theory and the Ethic or Care Theory. It reviewed 21 empirical studies published between 2013 to 2025 from Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Namibia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Tanzania. The findings indicate that the challenges facing student's mothers are interconnected. First, academic challenges including limited concentrations in classroom and limited time, which can lead to poor academic performance. Second, financial challenges include cost of childcare. Finally, social challenges include isolation and stigmatization. The findings support role strain theory, as evidenced by participants' experiences of overload, due to time constraints, and multiple responsibilities related to academic work and child caring. The findings also align with the ethic of care theory which call institutions support. The study recommends special consideration, flexibility and financial support as well as providing facilities for student's mothers to enable them to complete their study. This is necessarily due to their unique need, to ensure equity and good education outcomes.

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# 1. Introduction

Globally, quite a good number of universities are increasingly recognizing women's right to enroll and continue their studies during pregnancy and motherhood. Basically, they acknowledge that, higher education students are adults exercising their fundamental human rights (Abd Majid et al., 2019; Chinkondenji, 2025; N-yelbi, 2024). Recognizing this, many countries, including in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA), allow women to access higher education regardless of their status (Ashipala & Natanael, 2022; Fute & Wan, 2021; Ogunji et al., 2020). This opportunity enables student mothers to become future mothers through educational advancement. However, despite this opportunity literature document between recognition and reality (Opit et al., 2020).

While motherhood should not constitute a barrier to educational advancement, the practical challenges of managing dual responsibilities of academic pursuits and childcare, present substantial obstacles that significantly impact student mothers' educational outcomes and the overall well-being. Patently, the SSA context presents unique challenges for student mothers because; in many African societies, childcare is predominantly considered a maternal responsibility (Bukhosini, 2019). Largely, the existing literature from SSA reveals the multifaceted nature of challenges facing student mothers in higher education.

Although some countries such as South Africa report that most student mothers at the University of KwaZulu-Natal receive financial aid (Bukhosini, 2019) patently, the majority of student mothers have limited academic, economic, social or institutional support systems (Opit et al., 2020). Therefore, this situation contrasts sharply with the developments in higher-income countries where targeted support programs have been implemented. For example, in the US, the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program supported approximately 3,300 student mothers on childcare costs for about 4,000 children during the 2016-2017 academic year (Emrey-Arras, 2019). In SSA, however, the literature reveals a markedly different landscape characterized by

inadequate institutional support and fragmented services for student mothers who are in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Studies from Nigeria for example, point a critical gap in the availability and accessibility of childcare (Ogunji et al., 2020). In Ghana evidence shows serious challenges in classroom concentration, persistence fatigue and lack of essential facilities such as lactation rooms (Adofo, 2013; Amos et al., 2021; Dankyi et al., 2019). Similarly, research from Namibia, indicates a direct link between nursing motherhood and academic performance (Ashipala & Natanael, 2022). In essence, evidence consistently indicates that, student mothers face serious academic consequences, including poor examination performance, supplementary examinations, delayed degree completion, increased dropout rates and social isolation (Baluyos & Alvarico, 2024; Gospel-Tony et al., 2018; Kigen et al., 2022; Munyua et al., 2022; Ogunji et al., 2020; Rhone, 2023; Thompson-Miller, 2023).

For instance, Lugulu (2015) in Kenya reported that, motherhood significantly affected students' academic progress as 37% of them sat for supplementary examinations and 23% deferred studies while others repeated courses or were discontinued. Despite these documented struggles, the majority of student mothers continue striving to achieve their academic goals (Anibijuwon & Esimai, 2020; Torres et al., 2020), while being held to the same demanding academic standards as all other students (N-yelbi, 2024).

The literature presents divergent perspectives on addressing this issue. While some scholars argue for delayed childbearing until degree completion due to the complexity of managing multiple roles (Bogi et al., 2023), others advocate for robust institutional support mechanisms. Principally, they emphasize that motherhood is a natural biological process that should not preclude educational advancement (Anibijuwon & Esimai, 2020; Torres et al., 2020; Sativa, 2025) and that, student mothers require unique attention and additional support (Cranney, 2025). Essentially, some student mothers view childbearing during their studies as exercising their reproductive rights while efficiently managing

life stages, while others argue that it secures their children's futures (Fatima et al., 2025; Maisela & Ross, 2018). However, institutional responses remain inadequate, since, quite a good number, have policies that allow pregnancy and childbearing but provide no specific support in reality, leaving the burden to fall entirely on student mothers (Fulton, 2023; Kisanga & Matiba, 2023; Madinah et al., 2021).

Despite the increasing awareness of the challenges faced by student mothers in HEIs, significant gaps remain in the existing literature. First, while research focusing on country specific are available (See Kakuru, 2021 in; Naidoo et al., 2021 in South Africa), there is clear lack of comprehensive literature review that synthesize these challenges across various countries in SSA. Second, many existing reviews focus on different populations, such as teenage or adolescent mothers in primary and secondary education (Kinya & Nzengya, 2025) or use methodologies that concentrate exclusively on adolescents instead of student mothers in HEIs (Kassa et al., 2018). Third, although many studies have documented specific challenges faced by student mothers, such as those by Bogi et al. (2023) in Ghana and Ogunji et al. (2020) in Nigeria—there is limited evidence that comprehensive review these challenges in a holistic and multidimensional way in the context of SSA.

This comprehensive narrative literature review addresses the identified gaps by synthesizing the existing evidence on the multifaceted challenges faced by student mothers pursuing higher education in SSA, contrasting with single-country studies (Morgan et al., 2023, 2025; Mukabana et al., 2024). By adopting a regional approach, this review explores the contexts of HEIs across multiple SSA countries. The main research question focuses on the challenges facing student mothers in SSA. Specifically, this research seeks to answer three key questions based on the existing literature: What academic challenges student mother encounter? What financial obstacles do hinder their progress? And what social challenges do affect their educational experiences?

This review has synthesized geographically scattered studies from SSA, revealing how academic, financial and social challenges intersect.

The review also highlights the urgency of HLIs to respond to the challenges facing student mothers, as well as areas requiring interventions.

The synthesis further informs educational officials and policy makers to consider unique needs of student mothers to foster conducive learning environment.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This literature review is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Role Strain Theory (RST) (Goode, 1960) and the Ethics of Care Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for analysing the multidimensional challenges facing student mothers in SSA countries.

### **Role Strain Theory**

The Role Strain Theory (RST) serves as the analytical framework for understanding the challenges facing student mothers as they pursue their studies in higher education while caring for their children. According to Goode (1960), individuals experience role strain when they find it difficult to fulfil the demands of a single role due to competing responsibilities. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of student mothers in SSA, where the intersection of educational and maternal roles generates unique challenges.

Student mothers pursuing higher education often encounter significant tension as they strive to meet stringent academic demands. They are expected to attend classes punctually, engage in self-study, complete assignments on time, and care for their infants. The balancing acts required to manage these responsibilities can lead to considerable stress and strain, illustrating the core tenets of RST.

In SSA, resources challenges are particularly acute for student mothers. They may face challenges of getting accommodation, access to lactation rooms and financial constraints related to childcare, issues that their

non-parenting peers typically do face. The financial challenges often arise from the dual demands placed on them, generating increased expenses for childcare and transportation. As such student mothers may struggle to find the time and resources needed to meet academic expectations, further confirming the applicability of RST in this study.

Socially, student mothers often find difficulty balancing a healthy social life, which contributes to their role strain. The time devoted to maternal responsibilities frequently reduced opportunities for peer engagement and academic networking, leading to social isolation. The RST theory is suitable in this study because guide to explain various documented academic challenges faced by student mothers, including concentration difficulties, persistent fatigue, time management issues, and academic performance (Adofo, 2013; Amos et al., 2021; Ashipala & Natanael, 2022; Dankyi et al., 2019) in SS context.

### **Ethics of Care Theory**

The ethic of Care Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the unique challenges faced by student mothers in higher education while pursuing their studies. This theory is based on four key principles: interconnectedness, responsibility, moral descion making, and contextual understanding. These principles underscore the necessity for addressing the unique challenges student mothers while pursuing their studies with motherhood responsibilities.

To effectively support student mothers, educational institutions must develop comprehensive networks that acknowledge their interconnectedness. This principle highlights the relationships and social ties that enhance their experiences in the academia. Compassionate policies designed to address the specific challenges these women face such as flexible learning options, including adjustable course schedules and online programs, can significantly alleviate the burden they carry. By embracing their responsibility as both students and caregivers, institutions can create an empathetic learning environment that fosters

academic success while considering the multifaceted roles student mother play.

Furthermore, establishing mentorship programs is essential for connecting student mothers with role models, thereby cultivating a sense of community and alleviating feelings of isolation. This approach reflects moral decision making by prioritizing the support of student mothers, acknowledging their needs, and providing them with resources to assist them while taking their dual roles. Practical support, such as allowing family members or friends to assist them with childcare during lectures, exams or study sessions, can empower student mothers to thrive academically, ensuring they have the conditions to succeed like peers.

Finally, previous studies such as Miller (2021) on academic motherhood amid the covid 19 pandemic highlight the effectiveness of Ethic of Care Theory in Educational context. This theory’s contextual understanding is crucial, as it recognizes that the challenges faced by student mothers cannot be viewed in isolation. Thus, the theory is applicable as it enhances understanding of the educational experiences of student mothers in SSA, ultimately promoting their success and well-being while acknowledging the broader social and economic context they exist.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a narrative literature review approach to critically synthesize existing literature in SSA on challenges faced by student mothers. This methodology was chosen because it facilitated the comprehensive critical synthesis across multiple SSA countries, addressing geographical fragmentation in the existing research. In essence, narrative reviews are particularly effective for exploring multidimensional phenomena such as academic, social and financial challenges that student mothers encounter, while facilitating thematic analysis and critical interpretation of findings that can influence policy and practice,

## **Literature Search Strategy**

Literature search was conducted from relevant studies published between 2013 and 2025 to capture challenges facing student mothers who are pursuing higher education in Sub Saharan African countries. In achieving this strategy, multiple electronic data base was also searched, including AJOAL, DOAJ, ERIC, Google Scholar and institutional repositories from major Sub-Saharan African universities. The search strategy employed a combination of key words and Boolean operators so as to maximize retrieval of relevant literature. The key terms included “student parents”, “teenage mothers”, “student mothers, “and “higher education” combined with geographical identifiers and terms related to challenges. Additional researches included terms like "academic performance," "childcare “and” financial constraints." The reference list of the identified articles was manually searched to locate additional relevant studies.

## **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The studies included in this narrative review, typically focused on student mothers in HEIs in SSA, uniquely exploring their academic, social and financial challenges they face while pursuing their studies. The review also incorporated studies in English and published between 2013 and 2025. The study included only empirical research methods or solid theoretical analyses. This research excluded all the studies that focused solely on primary or secondary education, those examining adolescent mothers outside HEIs or lacking methodological rigor. Finally, 21 articles from seven countries namely Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria and Namibia which were screened for relevant and evaluated in detail, meet the inclusion criteria.

## **Data Extraction and analysis**

Data extraction was carried out systematically to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness. Information, extracted for each study included author(s) and year of publications, country and institutional context,

sample characteristics and key findings. In this analysis, the data were organized in a matrix to identify themes across studies. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke approach (2006), was employed to synthesize the findings, progressing through stages of familiarization, coding, theme identification and narrative synthesis. The analysis was guided by RST (1960) and ethics of care theory to inform interpretation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This literature review which basically analyzed the existing secondary data, did not involve primary data, in this manner not requiring formal ethical approval. However, ethical principles guided the process, to ensure proper citation and respectful presentation of the sensitive information regarding student mothers. Evidently, the review upheld academic honesty, transparency in methodology and responsible scholarship throughout.

## **3. Data Presentation and Discussion of the Findings**

This section presents and discusses the findings from the reviewed literature on the challenges facing student mothers in SSA, analyzed through the theoretical lenses of RST (Goode, 1960) and Ethics of Care Theory. Essentially, data are organized into three major thematic categories namely: Academic Challenges, Financial Challenges and Social Challenges as indicated in Table 4.1.

*Table 1: Challenges Facing Student Mothers Based on the Reviewed Literature*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub themes</b>	<b>Articles reviewed</b>	<b>Countries</b>
Academic Challenges	Role Conflict and Class Attendance	Maisela and Ross (2018); Musili (2018); Ngunyi et al. (2025); Osuamn et al. (2016); Taukeni	South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Namibia

Themes	Sub themes	Articles reviewed	Countries
		(2014	
	Concentration Deficits and Sleep Deprivation	Amos et al. (2021); Ogunji et al. (2020); Osafo (2016))	Ghana, Nigeria
	Academic Performance Impacts:	Esia-Donkoh (2014); Mwangi (2022)	Ghana, Kenya,
	Institutional Inflexibility	Danky et al. (2019); Kakuru (2021); Shange & Maharaj (2025)	Ghana, Uganda, South Africa
Financial Challenges	Childcare Costs:	Danky et al. (2019); Kanana et al. (2021); Ngunyi et al. (2025)	Kenya, Ghana,
	Housing and Transportation Expenses	Adofu (2013); Alabi et al. (2025); Bukhosini (2019); Kavishe (2025); Kigen et al. (2022); Kisanga and Matiba (2023); Madinah et al. (2021)	Nigeria Ghana, Tanzania South Africa, Uganda
Social Challenges	Stigma and Social Isolation	Kakuru (2021); Kigen et al. (2022); N-yelbi (2024)	Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda
	Loss of Social Engagement	Esia-Donkoh (2014); N-yelbi (2024) Bukhosini (2019); Kanana et al. (2021); Maisela & Ross (2018)	Ghana South Africa, Kenya

Themes	Sub themes	Articles reviewed	Countries
	Lack of Institutional Infrastructure	Amos et al. (2021); Madinah et al. (2021); Kakuru (2021)	Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria
	Psychological Stress	Amos et al. (2021); Bukhosini (2019); Opit et al. (2020); Taukeni (2014)	South Africa, Ghana, Uganda, Namibia

## Academic Challenges

### *Role Conflict and Class Attendance*

Basically, student mothers across SSA reported persistent struggles in balancing their dual roles, leading to frequent class absences a pattern consistent with RST (Goode, 1960) core premise that, individuals with multiple role obligations experience conflict when role demands exceed available resources. In Kenya, Ngunyi et al. (2025) found that, 41% of the student mothers had missed classes after having children, while Musili (2018) documented conflicts arising from juggling childcare, household duties and academic obligations. Similarly, in South Africa, Maisela and Ross (2018, p. 50) quoted a student mother stating, “*It is difficult to balance dual roles since, that is why, I had to miss classes for there was no one to take care of my child.*” Moreover, in Uganda, Madinah et al. (2021, p. 80) reported students traveling long distances and arriving to lectures when they were already in progress, with some lecturers refusing them entry. Likewise, in Ghana, Osuman et al. (2016) reported student-mothers struggling to attend lectures and preparing adequately for exams due to various non-academic commitments. Conversely, Taukeni (2014) in Namibia, found student mothers skipping lectures, further demonstrating the universal nature of RST’s predictions.

These findings validate Goode's (1960) assertion that competing role demands create psychological tension and behavioral strain, regardless of the cultural context. When individuals cannot simultaneously meet

the expectations of their various roles, in this case, as students and as mothers, they experience role overload, leading to compromised performance in one or both domains.

To address these challenges, Kisanga and Matiba (2023) in Tanzania, recommended the establishment of special hostels for nursing mothers, allowing them to pursue their studies more smoothly. This suggests that structural interventions can significantly reduce role strain by bringing childcare responsibilities closer to academic obligations.

Furthermore, applying the Ethics of Care Theory emphasizes the importance of promoting empathy and compassion in the educational settings. Recognizing the inherent moral responsibility to support one another can foster an environment where student mothers are better understood and accommodated. By prioritizing the needs of student mothers in a caring context, institutions can help improve their academic experiences and outcomes.

#### *Concentration deficits and Sleep Deprivation*

The literature consistently documents how maternal responsibilities, particularly nighttime childcare and breastfeeding, severely impact student mothers' ability to concentrate during lectures. A Nigerian student mother captured this reality that: *"Sometimes I cannot prepare very well for my quiz since my baby sometimes wakes up in the middle of the night and I have to breastfeed him. Sometimes I find myself dosing in the class when a lecture is going on since I do not get enough rest"* (Ogunji et al., 2020, p. 288-289). Besides, in Ghana, Amos et al. (2021, p. 5) reported student mothers stating that, *"Early and late lectures affect my personal engagements with my children and academic work since I am always tried to learn after the day's lectures."* A previous study by Osafo (2016) found a minimum of 71% of student mothers at College of Distance Education of the University of Cape Coast performing laborious non-academic activities daily which posed negative high effects on their academic performance.

These experiences illustrate the concept of resource depletion in RST (Goode, 1960). The physical and cognitive demands of motherhood, particularly through nighttime responsibilities such as breastfeeding and childcare, result in insufficient energy for academic engagement. The theory posits that individuals possess finite resources, such as time, energy, and attention, which must be distributed across various role demands. When one role requires extensive nighttime energy expenditure through childcare and breastfeeding, the cognitive and physical resources available for academic responsibilities become depleted. This resource scarcity leads to what the Role Strain Theory describes as “role strain,” ultimately contributing to concentration deficits and diminished academic capacity.

From the perspective of the Ethics of Care Theory, it is essential to recognize the interconnectedness of student mothers' responsibilities. To effectively support these women, educational institutions should implement flexible learning options that enable student mothers to manage their time more effectively. Offering adaptable course schedules and online learning opportunities can help student mothers balance their academic responsibilities with their caregiving duties. By prioritizing policies that address these challenges, institutions can create an empathetic learning environment that fosters the well-being and academic success of student mothers.

The alignment of the RST and the Ethics of Care Theory underscores the necessity for tailored institutional support, which acknowledges the dual pressures faced by student mothers. By addressing the issues of concentration deficits and sleep deprivation within this dual theoretical framework, we can better understand the challenges student mothers encounter and work toward systemic changes that promote their success and overall well-being.

#### *Academic Performance Impacts*

The cumulative effects of role strain are manifested in poor academic outcomes across the region. In Ghana, Esia-Donkoh (2014, p. 31) documented a final-year student mother lamenting, “*My child does not*”  
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*allow me to study at all. Sometimes when I have a quiz, she cries all night, preventing me from studying. Last semester for example, I had grade D (50%-54%) in almost all my courses; my worst academic results on campus.”*

In Kenya, Mwangi (2022) found that, poor academic performance among student mothers was due to low class attendance, missing continuous assessment tests and incomplete assignments. Besides, in Uganda, a student mother reported that, *“I always fail to meet the academic deadlines especially handing in course assignments in time and attending tutorials and group discussion projects. This is due to failure to manage the limited time available at my disposal”* (Madinah et al., 2021:80). Moreover, in Namibia, the study by Taukeni (2014) found that student mothers often failed some modules and missed the opportunity to sit for initial examinations. Academic challenges facing student mothers have also been reported in Nigeria (Anibijuwon & Esimai, 2020).

These documented performance deficits highlight how role overload produces tangible academic disadvantages, validating RST as posited by Goode (1960). The strain from managing conflicting role expectations profoundly impacts performance, resulting in failing grades, missed deadlines, and unfinished coursework. The theory underscores that individuals juggling multiple roles possess limited resources—time, energy, and focus—which become further depleted when responsibilities clash.

The Ethics of Care Theory also gives valuable insights into these challenges as faced by student mothers. Regarding the culture of empathy and community support, educational institutions can help alleviate some of the burdens student mothers experience. For instance, providing childcare support or allowing for cooperative caregiving arrangements can enable student mothers to better manage their academic responsibilities. Empowering fellow students or family members to assist with childcare responsibilities as well as hiring a baby

assistant, can create the necessary time for attending lectures, completing assignments, and studying effectively.

In this context, institutional policies that promote a caring environment can help mitigate the negative impacts of role strain, ultimately enhancing academic performance. By prioritizing the needs of student mothers and creating supportive structures rooted in the Ethics of Care, academic institutions can substantially improve their educational experiences and outcomes.

### **Institutional Inflexibility**

It was noted in Uganda by Kakuru (2021, p. 740) that a student mothers missed a test due to her baby's illness. Unfortunately, she could not provide the required medical documentation since she lacked money for a doctor's visit, resulting in a zero grade and course failure. Likewise, in Ghana, Danky et al. (2019) documented nursing mothers struggling with night classes and difficulty in understanding topics taught in their absences. Furthermore, in South Africa, a study by Shange and Maharaj (2025) at KwaZulu-Natal reported limited assistance for young mothers at the university.

These instances illustrate the pressing need for educational institutions to adopt more flexible policies that align with the Ethics of Care Theory, which emphasizes empathy and support for individuals in caregiving roles. By implementing compassionate, context-aware interventions, institutions can help mitigate the role strain identified in Goode's (1960) RST, where competing demands on time and resources lead to compromised academic performance. A commitment to caring and responsive educational practices not only fosters a more inclusive environment but also empowers student mothers to balance their dual responsibilities effectively, ultimately enhancing their academic success and well-being.

## Financial Challenges

From literature reviewed, financial constraints have emerged as a pervasive challenge across Sub-Saharan African contexts, with student mothers facing increased expenses while simultaneously experiencing reduced capacity for income generation. This is a pattern consistent with RST's (Goode, 1960) predictions about resource depletion across multiple role domains as well as the ethic of care theory.

## Childcare Costs

The financial burden of childcare constitutes a primary challenge for student mothers across the region as in Ghana, Esia-Donkoh (2014) documented that, non-relative baby assistants cost between GHC20.00-40.00 (\$13-27) monthly, with total additional recurrent costs for babies under 6 months reaching GHC192.00 (\$148) monthly. Besides, Danky et al. (2019) in Ghana, found that, 65.9% of the respondents identified the cost of employing babysitters as a significant challenge. In contrast, although Kanana et al. (2021) in Kenya at Egerton University found 96% of the student mothers receiving financial support from their families, Ngunyi et al. (2025) reported that, the student mothers were facing financial difficulties, as 66.7% of them could not afford babysitters, subsequently finding it harder for them to balance both childcare and studies.

Additionally studies reviewed reported severe financial stress due to the cost of caring for children affecting their educational persistence as in South Africa, Maisela and Ross (2018, p. 51) quoted a student mother stating that, "...*sincerely speaking, finances are a very stressful factor in my life*". Besides, Bukhosini (2019) found that, covering children's living expenses presented significant challenges for student mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, Kakuru (2021) documented that in Uganda, a student mother was making chapatis (flat bread) and supplying them into a nearby restaurant to earn income. In addition, beyond childcare and housing, student mothers face numerous child-related expenses. Further, in Ghana, Danky et al. (2019)

identified buying weaning food for babies and diapers as significant financial challenges

These financial challenges exemplify the interplay between RST and the Ethics of Care Theory. Since childcare necessitates substantial financial expenditure, fewer resources remain available for educational expenses, thereby creating financial role strain. Moreover, the time required for motherhood reduces the capacity for paid employment, further depleting financial resources. This creates a double squeeze of increased expenses and decreased income, illustrating the resource depletion mechanism central to role strain. The strain of managing multiple roles—as both a caregiver and a student, leads to overwhelming stress and compromises academic performance. Institutions are therefore advised to adopt a caring approach by implementing financial aid and support programs that alleviate these burdens, thus recognizing the interconnectedness of student mothers' responsibilities. By addressing these financial challenges with empathy and responsive policies, educational institutions can foster an environment conducive to both academic success and personal well-being.

### **Housing and transportation expenses**

The literature reviewed from SSA reveals that institutional policies excluding student mothers from campus housing create additional financial burdens that exacerbate their challenges. In Uganda, Kigen et al. (2022) reported that married Muslim student mothers could not reside on campus because university facilities did not accommodate them. Similarly, at the University of Dar es Salaam, Kisanga and Matiba (2023) found that student mothers were denied accommodation that was available to other students. At Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, Kavishe (2025) quoted one student who stated, “After giving birth, I had to leave the hostel to arrange for a room”.

In Ghana, Amos et al. (2021) documented the absence of lactation rooms and adequate spaces for babysitters accompanying student mothers to lectures. Likewise, at the Islamic University in Uganda

(IUIU), all 30 study participants acknowledged policies supporting student marriage but criticized the complete lack of dedicated childcare facilities (Madinah et al., 2021, p. 80). One student articulated this institutional contradiction by saying, “*Surprisingly, an institution permits me to get married while studying but denies support after the fruits of that marriage. [...] Can a mother concentrate on studies when the safety of her child is not guaranteed?*” This statement starkly reveals the absurdity of institutional policies that recognize women's rights to marry and bear children but simultaneously withdraw crucial support necessary for their academic success.

These housing restrictions impose an additional financial strain on student mothers, compelling them to incur extra costs for private accommodation while managing parenting responsibilities. This scenario aligns with RST (Goode, 1960), which posits that competing demands on time and resources result in significant psychological tension. When student mothers are unable to secure adequate housing, they experience compounded stress due to increased financial obligations and challenges related to balancing childcare with academic responsibilities.

Transportation costs further complicate these challenges. Madinah et al. (2021) found that student mothers in Uganda faced high transportation costs, long walks, and difficulties navigating public transport with babies. In South Africa, Bukhosini (2019, p. 55) reported that student mothers spent many hours commuting each day, returning home exhausted and with insufficient time for academic work. Adofo (2013) similarly noted that transportation costs to and from school posed significant barriers for these students.

From the perspective of the Ethics of Care Theory, it becomes clear that failing to accommodate the unique needs of student mothers undermines their ability to succeed academically. Thus, institutions must recognize the interconnectedness of student mothers' responsibilities and the moral imperative to support them through empathetic and responsive policies. Providing suitable housing, including lactation rooms as advocated by

Alabi et al. (2025) in Nigeria, will minimize unnecessary movement and transportation costs. Additionally, addressing transportation challenges can help mitigate role strain, ensuring that student mothers have the necessary resources and time to balance caregiving and academic obligations. By fostering a more supportive environment, educational institutions can empower student mothers to thrive both academically and personally.

## **Social Challenges**

The studies reviewed revealed that student mothers in SSA are experiencing stigma and social isolation as well as psychological stress as presented here under and analyzed through the lenses of role strain theory and ethic of care theory.

### **Stigma and Social Isolation**

In Ghana, N-yelbi (2024, p. 52) documented how peers questioned student mothers' academic legitimacy by asserting that: *“Some of my peers questioned about my academic abilities and commitment to my studies since I was a nursing mother. It was disheartening... hence felt like I did not deserve to be on campus as a mother”*. This experience illustrates the Feminist Theory's concept of symbolic violence which is the internalization of patriarchal judgments that position motherhood and serious academic pursuit as mutually exclusive identities for women. Moreover, another Ghanaian student mother revealed the painful social consequences by contending that: *“Since my child is always seen as a disturbance to them, I prefer to be alone than to move with people who will not understand me. Though it is hurtful to be seen walking alone, for now, that is my only option”* (N-yelbi, 2024, p. 53).

Evidently, at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy in Tanzania, the moral dimensions of this stigma became explicit when a pregnant student reported that: *“some of my colleagues were not ready to work with us since they saw us as sinners”* (Kavishe, 2025:146). This framing of student pregnancy through religious-moral discourse exemplifies how

patriarchal ideologies utilize moral condemnation to control women's sexuality and reproductive choices. This also seems to suggest a particular stigma for unwed student mothers.

Moreover, in Nigeria, Kigen et al. (2022) found student mothers unable to associate freely with course mates and were often avoided by peers, thus demonstrating institutional complicity in social exclusion. Similarly, in Uganda, stigmatized mothers were found to face sociocultural challenges and were often neglected by fathers while relying on parental support and striving for additional income (Kakuru, 2021). Likewise, in Namibia, Taukeni (2014) documented the psychological manifestations of this isolation, with student mothers reporting anger, restlessness, loneliness, and drowsiness which are symptoms reflecting the embodied consequences of social marginalization.

These findings highlight the profound impact of social challenges, including patriarchy, stigma, and inadequate support networks, on student mothers across SSA. The experiences of stigmatization and social isolation reveal how these women encounter not only the burden of academic responsibilities but also the weight of societal judgment, which exacerbates their role strain. RST (Goode, 1960) emphasizes the psychological tension resulting from competing demands, and in this context, it is evident that the societal expectations imposed on student mothers significantly detract them from their academic performance and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the Ethics of Care underscores the moral imperative for institutions to cultivate a supportive environment that acknowledges the interconnectedness of caregiving and educational responsibilities. By implementing policies and support systems that address stigma and foster inclusivity, educational institutions can help alleviate the role strain experienced by student mothers. This approach not only promotes their academic success but also empowers them to navigate the complexities of motherhood and education without the burden of social isolation and prejudice

### Loss of Social Engagement and Inadequate Support Networks

The literature consistently documents how maternal responsibilities prevent student mothers from engaging in social activities that are crucial for peer connection and academic networking. In Ghana, Esia-Donkoh (2014, p. 31) found that student mothers missed many social interactions, with their only peer engagement occurring in church, leading to significant social isolation as they remained indoors caring for their babies. Similarly, N-yelbi (2024) reported that pregnant and parenting students often avoid social contact as a strategy to manage academic demands, which subsequently exacerbates their psychological challenges. This isolation results in a loss of vital faculty, departmental, and university social activities, further compounding the difficulties of balancing academic work with childcare responsibilities.

In South Africa, the research presents a complex picture regarding support systems. Bukhosini (2019) highlighted that childcare remains predominantly a maternal responsibility in KwaZulu-Natal, reflecting entrenched patriarchal norms and underscoring the absence of adequate support for student mothers managing dual roles. Conversely, Maisela and Ross (2018) found that family and friend support enabled some South African student mothers to navigate their social, emotional, and financial challenges. This illustrates the critical role of social support networks in alleviating the effects of role strain.

At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Shange and Maharaj (2025) noted that student mothers often rely heavily on their parents for care, suggesting that intergenerational support can compensate for the absence of partner support. Similarly, in Kenya, Kanana et al. (2021) reported that student mothers at Egerton University identified their primary need as having *"someone to talk to and assure them that it is possible,"* emphasizing the importance of emotional validation alongside practical support.

From the perspective of the Ethics of Care Theory, it is evident that institutions must prioritize creating supportive environments that acknowledge the unique challenges faced by student mothers. An

empathic community that recognizes the importance of social engagement and adequate support networks, educational institutions can help mitigate the effects of role strain. Ensuring that student mothers feel connected and supported not only empowers them to succeed academically but also fosters their emotional well-being, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and thriving academic environment.

### **Psychological Stress**

In South Africa, Bukhosini (2019:56) documented the psychological impact of the role conflict of which sometimes, a student mother is at school and a child at home is sick. When she gets a call telling her that “a child is sick at home, she cannot focus on her studies,” Besides, in Ghana, Amos et al. (2021:4) reported similar experiences that *“Sometimes, I skip lectures so as to take my baby to the hospital when he is sick. Basically, it affects my studies since I cannot concentrate on my studies.”*

In Uganda, Opit et al. (2020) revealed the impossible dilemmas breastfeeding student mothers face at Kyambogo University which is choosing between baby-sitting versus attending lectures; completing a lecture versus breastfeeding a crying hungry baby; undertaking child bonding activities versus academic activities; completing an exam or test versus breastfeeding a crying hungry baby; baby care versus attending academic group discussions and baby care versus completing coursework assignments on time. These dilemmas illustrate RST’s concept of the role conflict in its most acute form, situations where both roles demand immediate attention of which any choice results in failure in one domain.

In Namibia, Taukeni (2014:96) quoted a frustrated student mother who asserted that *“Sometimes I can be restless, not in a mood, not having time to study. Sometimes I have an appointment to see the doctor consequently ending up skipping lectures”*. Consequently, Adofo (2013) recommended guidance and counseling services in Ghana in order to address these psychological burdens.

These psychological stressors reflect how the intersecting challenges of academic, financial, and social strains create mental health impacts that further compromise educational success. From the perspective of RST (Goode, 1960), the mental health challenges arise from the sustained overload of trying to meet all role demands simultaneously without adequate resources or institutional support. Moreover, the Ethics of Care underscores the necessity for educational institutions to recognize these unique burdens and adopt a compassionate approach that fosters an environment of support, understanding, and resources tailored for student mothers. By prioritizing the well-being of these women through empathetic policies, institutions can help mitigate psychological stress and promote a healthier balance between caregiving and academic success.

## 4. Conclusion

This comprehensive literature review has critically examined the multifaceted challenges facing student mothers pursuing higher education across Sub-Saharan Africa, grounded in RST (Goode, 1960) and the Ethics of Care Theory. The synthesis of evidence from Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, and Tanzania reveals consistent patterns of academic, financial, and social challenges that fundamentally compromise the educational experience of student mothers throughout the region.

Academically, student mothers face severe role overload, which manifests as concentration deficits, sleep deprivation, frequent class absences, and missed assignments, thereby validating RST's assertion that insufficient time and energy hinder the fulfillment of dual role demands. Financially, they contend with substantial childcare costs, housing expenses due to exclusion from campus accommodation, transportation hurdles, and other child-related expenses, all while struggling with reduced capacity for income generation. Socially, they encounter stigmatization, isolation, and judgment from peers, compounded by inadequate support networks and institutional failures to

provide essential resources, such as childcare facilities and flexible policies. This disconnect illustrates how HEIs are predominantly designed for traditional students without caregiving responsibilities, thereby systematically disadvantaging student mothers.

This review contributes significantly to literature as one of the few comprehensive regional syntheses that demonstrate the intersection of academic, financial, and social challenges. By integrating RST and the Ethics of Care, it highlights the need for compassionate institutional support tailored to student mothers' unique circumstances.

The findings advocate urgent policy interventions, including the establishment of on-campus childcare centers, provision of family-friendly housing, creation of lactation rooms, and implementation of flexible attendance policies. Furthermore, targeted financial assistance and comprehensive support programs addressing all challenge dimensions are essential. While this review acknowledges limitations, including geographic gaps and a predominant deficit focus, it paves way for future research aimed at enhancing inclusive learning environments. Ultimately, empowering student mothers to manage their academic and parenting roles is crucial for their success in completing higher education while fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities.

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## 6. Short biography

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