

# Challenges Faced by Pregnant Students at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana and Strategies for Supporting Them

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**Abstract:** This study explored the challenges faced by pregnant students at the University of Education, Winneba and strategies for supporting them. It was a qualitative study underpinned by interpretive philosophical thought. The study employed a case study approach and collected data using the semi-structured interview. Snowball sampling strategy was employed to select thirty (30) pregnant students, maximal variation sampling technique to select five (5) counsellors, and convenient sampling technique to select five (5) lecturers for the study. The study revealed that the social challenges faced by the students were related to the attitudes of lecturers and students towards them, while the academic challenges included slow pace of studying, which affected their performance negatively. The study pointed out that the pregnant students coped with their social challenges mainly through the avoidance coping mechanism and the academic challenges by managing their time effectively and joining group discussions. It was concluded, among others, that the pregnant students at the university experienced some difficulties in their academic work because the available facilities as well as their colleagues and lecturers in the institution do not support their condition or situation. It was recommended, among others that, the university's counselling centre should educate students and lecturers on how to handle and associate with the pregnant students and treat them as individuals with special needs.

**Key words:** pregnant students, coping strategies, academic, social and psychological challenge

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education is believed to provide knowledge and skills that hold potentials for economic empowerment, for better livelihood and social development. Due to their reproductive responsibilities women have to combine their quest for higher education with pregnancy. Pregnancy is a unique experience and a major social expectation of women that most females encounter at various stages in their lives. This makes pregnancy an acceptable occurrence in most tertiary institutions in Ghana.

Many women may be going back to study, because of the increasing advocacy campaign for the equality of women, high competition at work and at home. Constantly, many

women, including mothers, have joined institutions of higher learning and are compelled to combine academic work with other responsibilities as wives or mothers and some of them get pregnant along the course of study.

The numbers of students who become pregnant during their studies are likely to increase as data from Scotland and other European Countries show a positive correlation between the increasing age profile of students and the likelihood of their having a child (Orr, Schnitzer, & Frackmann, 2008). In the UK in 2008/09, 35 percent of all female first-year students are aged 30 or over. Given the predicted demographic change of an increased number of older students in higher education, the number of students becoming pregnant during their studies is likely to increase (Universities UK, 2008). The National Union of Students (NUS) in the United Kingdom (UK) interviewed 2167 students in higher and further education with children and found out that 29 percent became pregnant during their studies (NUS, 2009).

According to Act 527 of the constitution of the Republic of Ghana, all persons shall have the right to equal educational opportunities and facilities and with a view to achieving the full realization of that right. One of the implications of this is that all students who get pregnant in higher institutions are allowed to continue with their education if only they are in the right position to combine the stress involved in the pregnancy with academic work. The Ghanaian culture actually expects women of reproductive age to reproduce. This makes pregnancy an acceptable occurrence in most tertiary institutions in Ghana. Although Ghanaian Universities allow pregnancy in school, challenges associated with pregnancies do not exempt pregnant students from following the academic requirements of the universities (Etuah, Gbagbo and Nkrumah, 2018).

The pregnant students experience challenges as they combine busy lives and the demands of study and or work while also trying to save time for friends and family. (National Health Ministries, 2006). The challenges include stress and anxiety, failure in courses being studied, inability to meet family

needs, inadequate funding and lack of support from partners. As a result of the challenges, they are sometimes unable to achieve their educational aims (Mamhute, 2011). But it has become necessary for the woman to obtain a higher education to attain the necessary qualification and certificate that will help them achieve their aspirations, to fit into the job market and equally support the home or family (Anane, Adangabe and Inkoom, 2021). Even though stressful, they still keep their heads above the waters. According to the National Health Ministries (2006), stress over a prolonged period of time can have increased certain health risks. Despite the increased number of women entering universities and the knowledge that women learn in different ways from men gender issues, there remain a challenge of females combining pregnancy and academic work at the university of education, winneba (Brickhouse, 2005). Hence the need to investigate the challenges faced by this pregnant students and their coping strategies.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Ghana, many women are now enrolling in tertiary educational institutions and beginning to earn more advanced degrees in order to better their lot. Studying while pregnant is an uphill struggle and so possesses a lot of challenges to the pregnant student (Mamhute, 2011). Although Ghanaian Universities allow pregnancy in school, challenges associated with pregnancies do not exempt pregnant students from following the academic requirements of the universities. It is imperative, therefore, to find out the challenges the pregnant students in Ghana face and ways of supporting them to succeed academically.

### 1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the challenges faced by pregnant students (both undergraduates and postgraduates) at the University of Education, Winneba campus and ways of supporting them to succeed academically.

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

- Identify the challenges faced by pregnant students in the University of Education, Winneba (UEW);
- Assess the impact of the challenges on their academic performance;
- Identify strategies that can be employed to support pregnant students in UEW.

### 1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

- What are the challenges faced by pregnant students at the University of Education, Winneba campus?
- How do the challenges faced by the pregnant students affect their academic work?

- How do the pregnant students cope with the demands of the pregnancy and the academic work?

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to literature on the challenges faced by pregnant students at UEW and ways of supporting them to succeed academically.

This research would also serve as an advocacy document to seek support for pregnant students at the University of Education, Winneba. This would actually prompt the attention of policy makers at UEW, to include pregnant students in their plans and thereby provide support which will make their stay on campus worthwhile, making them succeed academically.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

Qualitative research design underpinned by the interpretive paradigm was employed for the study.

### 2.2 Population

The population of this research was all pregnant students (both graduate and undergraduates) studying at the main campus (Winneba campus) of the University of Education, Winneba. At the time of the study, there were 50 pregnant students. However, some counsellors and lecturers at the University of Education, Winneba were involved in the study so that their perspectives could also be assessed.

### 2.3 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The sample size of the research comprised of thirty (30) pregnant students, five (5) counsellors and five (5) lecturers at the University of Education, Winneba- Winneba campuses based on their experience and contact with the pregnant students.

Multi-phase sampling technique was employed for the study. The first phase Snowball sampling was used in the selection of the thirty (30) pregnant students.

The second phase employed the maximal variation sampling strategy in the selection of the 5 counsellors and the 5 lecturers.

### 2.4 Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews were employed for the data collection.

### 2.5 Data Collection Procedure

The interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis. Each interviewed situation lasted for 50-60 minutes and was recorded. To ensure consistency during the interview, the researcher developed an interview protocol (Durdella, 2019) to guide the study.

## 2.6 Data Analysis

Data from the interview was transcribed and filed. The transcribed data was read several times enabling the researcher to attach meanings to pieces of data through coding.

In order to attribute quotation to the interviewees, the pregnant students were given the serial numbers PPS1 – PPS30 (where PPS stands for Participating Pregnant Student). The counsellors were also given serial numbers PC1 – PC5 (where PC stands for participating counsellors), the lecturers were given the serial numbers PL1 – PL5 (where PL stands for participating lecturers). Essentially, the data reconstruction involved a thematic approach.

## 2.7 Validation of Research Findings

Credibility of this study was ensured through the use of respondent triangulation. Respondent triangulation was achieved by using the instrument to gather the data from the pregnant students, lecturers and counsellors whereby their responses were compared.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### *Social Challenges Faced by the Pregnant Students, their Effects and Coping Strategies*

Some of the social challenges faced by the pregnant students at UEW were highlighted in the data. These were categorized into two; the attitude of other students toward the pregnant students and the attitudes of lecturers towards them.

#### *a. Attitude of Colleagues Towards Pregnant Students.*

According to the data most of the pregnant students interviewed echoed that some of their colleagues were rude to them and were not ready to help them. Some would not even allow them to join their groups for discussion or even group work because they felt these students were weak and may not get much time to research in order to contribute effectively to group work or discussions. As a result of these, the pregnant students felt so embarrassed which negatively affected their studies. A pregnant student said:

*Some of my friends are so rude to me, they refuse to give me their lecture notes to copy or even allow me to join their discussion group. These made me feel so sad which affected my studies.*

(PPS – 3)

Another student said:

*At times I feel so embarrassed by some comments made by some of my colleague which make me feel so miserable and unable to concentrate at lectures and during my private studies and this affected my academic performance negatively.*

(PPS-20)

The lecturers confirmed this by saying that sometimes some students make some painful comments which made the pregnant students feel belittled and embarrassed.

One expressed this by saying:

*At times during lectures some students make some funny comments that make the pregnant students feel so embarrassed. More often when dividing them into groups for group assignment, most students refused to be in the same group with pregnant students.*

(PL- 4)

Luttrel (2003) supported this view by pointing out that pregnant students were discriminated and not even accepted by their own peers or colleagues. As pointed out by Saidahand Dinah (2006) pregnant students tend to benefit and thrive in the academic sphere when other students understand their situation, feel for them and offer appropriate and timely assistance.

#### *The Attitude of Lecturers Towards Pregnant Students*

Another aspect of the social challenges faced by the pregnant students were related to the lecturers' attitudes towards them. From the findings, pregnant students indicated that comments made by some lecturers at times were so painful that it made them felt so embarrassed which negatively affected their studies, as pointed in the following comments.

*Some lecturers are rather difficulty and seem not to understand the situation of the pregnant students. At times some of the lecturers are so rude to us and show no pity at all. Their behaviour makes it difficult for us to approach them for any assistance.*

(PPS – 29)

*Some lecturers have no pity on us. They normally shout at us and do not consider or have any sympathy for us at all and this negatively affected our studies. I once felt so embarrassed and miserable the whole day that I could not even concentrate in class because of a comment one lecturer made when I was late to her class.*

(PPS-21)

The lecturers confirmed these comments pointing out that;

*As lecturers, we cannot compromise on education as long as universities are concern because universities are rated as a result of the performance of students. So we don't have sympathy or special package for pregnant students. I treat them like normal students.*

(PL – 1)

The above sentiments implied that some lecturers do not understand or feel for these pregnant students and so treat them like normal students. But it seems that some lecturers do not understand or felt for pregnant students. She again added that some lecturers threaten the pregnant students on outbursts

of anger but these students were adults who need to be treated fairly.

#### *Coping strategies*

Despite the social challenges of the pregnant students, they tried to push their way through the educational arena by adjusting to the situation in which they had found themselves. The pregnant students, therefore, derived certain coping strategies that helped them to stand firm regardless their situation. They ignored the painful comments from their lecturers and colleagues and concentrated on their studies.

Majority of the pregnant student said:

*I mostly ignore some of their (lecturers and students) comments though painful. I only encourage myself that maybe those who are rude to me do not understand what I'm going through as a pregnant student.*

(PPS-27)

*In fact, I ignore their (lecturers and students) comments and take it as a joke though painful. At times I try hard to pretend as if all was well and then concentrate on my academic work because if I'm to take everything at heart the stress will be too much for me to bear.*

(PPS-12)

A participating counsellor confirmed these concerns commenting that:

*It's good to sometimes avoid certain comments made by people and pretend as if they are not real; this actually helps the individual to minimize the existence of the stress.*

(Participating counsellor (PC) -3)

This means that pregnant students tend to repress the stress by means of denying its existence, helping them to focus and concentrate on their studies. Sincero (2012) supported this view by adding that people who tend to be repressors cope with the stress by means of denying or minimizing its existence. They use the avoidance coping mechanism such that they are unable to realize the potential negative outcomes of the stressful experience. Also, the data suggested that the pregnant students sometimes decided not to tell their lecturers and colleague students their problems and pretended all was well with them. This they said has been one of the wonderful coping strategies that helped them a lot. One of them had this to say:

*Sometimes, even when I'm not well I pretend to be okay and sit throughout a lecture or group discussion. It's better to be present with less concentration than not to be there.*

(PPS-30)

One of the counsellors confirmed commenting 'that lack of disclosure is also a coping strategy that mostly helps people under stress' (PC-1).

In Mamhute's (2011) study the participants deliberately decided not to communicate with their lecturers when they faced problems that affected their studies. In such instances, the student tried to work as if all was normal. Through aloofness or withdrawal, the mothering adult learners avoided comments by the lecturers and college administration which tended to bruise their self-esteem.

#### *Psychological/Emotional Challenges Faced by the Pregnant Students.*

It emerged from the data that the pregnant students faced some psychological challenges which were related to conflicting roles; inadequate support from colleague students, lecturers and family members; the pregnant students' realizations and symptoms of pregnancy.

Regarding the conflicting roles of the pregnant students, majority of the pregnant student participants complained that combining pregnancy with academic work posed so much stress and pressure on them. Some of them highlighted this by saying:

*Combining pregnancy with academic work has not been easy for me at all. I'm mostly stressed up and confused which put so much pressure on me and affects my studies.*

(PPS- 3).

*Hmm, it's not easy. I'm always frustrated and confused because of the stressful nature of pregnancy combined with the demands of academic work. In fact this has put so much pressure on me.*

(PPS - 15)

The participating counsellors confirmed this by saying that whenever two incompatible roles are combined, it can cause stress and put so much pressure on the pregnant students involved.

*The pressure put on an individual by two imposing and incompatible demands competing against each other poses so much stress upon the pregnant students.*

(PC-3)

Two imposing roles thus, the demands of academic work and the stressful nature of pregnancy put so much pressure on the pregnant student. The student trying to serve 'two masters' might end up creating psychological problems for themselves. Issues of conflicting roles as mothers and students are likely to create psychological problems like stress and pressure (Nujjuma&Kyarugahe, 2006). Roxburgh et al (2001) cited in (Mamhute, 2011) also added that mismatch between what is expected in parenthood and the actual reality of parenthood combined with studentship can cause stress and the new parent tries to adjust. The role conflict theory also explained that commitment to multiple roles can lead to incompatible and / or excessive roles expectations, which in turn can lead to physical and mental disequilibria (Ward, 2004).



Another aspect of the psychological challenges pregnant students faced was the inadequate support from colleague students, lecturers and family members. According to the data, most of the pregnant students felt lonely and unhappy as a result of inadequate support from colleague students, lecturers and family members. The pregnant students highlighted this in the following comments:

*Most of my colleagues ignored my company when they realized I was pregnant. Because of this I felt lonely and sad which made it difficult for me to study. In fact, I received no support from my colleagues, family and lecturers at all.*

(PPS-15).

*In fact, I felt so lonely because my family members abandon me and my colleagues and lecturers were also never there for me. It was such a boring experience which negatively affected my studies.*

(PPS-17).

One of the counsellors' interviewed added:

*When support is not forthcoming for the pregnant students, loneliness sets in which can make individuals feel so miserable.*

(PC-4).

This means that most pregnant students who did not get the support of their colleague students and lecturers experienced loneliness. Sekgobela (2008) in her study found out that majority of her participants (pregnant students) expressed feelings of loneliness. The participants gave poor family support, distance from their families and psychological problems as the reasons for feeling lonely.

#### *Coping strategies*

Despite the psychological turmoil these students encountered, they adopted certain coping strategies that helped them to adjust to the situation. Some denied the existence of the stress; others, aired their views to counsellors while the rest of the pregnant students according to the data, relied on the encouragement from their colleagues and lecturers. Some shared their personal experiences by saying:

*Whenever I felt depressed, my colleagues and some lecturers encouraged me. In fact that was what really kept me strong all the time.*

(PPS-28)

*Whenever I felt depressed, I always talk to a counsellor and most at times I encouraged myself that I can make it despite all odds which has motivated me and given me hope.*

(PPS-3).

A participating counsellor confirmed this by saying:

*Counselling is the best solution for someone who is depressed, confused or frustrated in life. I get so many pregnant students in my office.*

(PC-2)

The views above implied that some of the pregnant students sought for counselling, while others relied on the encouragement from colleagues, lecturers as well as family members to help them cope with their emotional predicaments. Mamhute (2011) confirmed this, arguing that encouragement from lecturers and other students made pregnant students strong and able to persevere throughout their studies.

#### *Ways of Supporting the Pregnant Students*

The findings regarding the support that the pregnant students needed from their colleague students and lecturers, the data pointed out that the pregnant students needed respect and love; patience and understanding; and encouragement from their lecturers and colleagues (students) to facilitate their success in the academic environment. The pregnant students confirmed this stating that:

*As pregnant students, we need love, respect, patience and encouragement from our colleagues and lecturers. These would make us feel comfortable in the academic environment and make it possible for us to approach any of them whenever their assistance is needed. Lecturers and students need to understand our situation and empathize with us.*

(PPS-24)

*We need to be loved, respected and treated with much patience because of our situation as pregnant students. Lecturers and students need to understand our condition and keep encouraging us from time to time.*

(PPS-15)

A counsellor participant was in support of the above sentiments that the pregnant students need to be loved, respected and handled with patience. Therefore, the lecturers and students need to understand their situation and keep encouraging them from time to time to enhance their academic success.

The data again revealed that counselling programmes should be provided specifically for pregnant students to help them combine their two conflicting roles successfully. Most students and lecturers do not understand our situation because they have no idea as to the challenges we encounter as pregnant students. The counsellors should therefore support us by educating the lecturers and students on how to associate with the pregnant students. Counselling programmes should also be organized for the pregnant students to relieve us of our stress.

(PPS-17)

*The counsellors need to organize programmes for pregnant students and as well educate the public especially students and lecturers on how to handle pregnant students so that we can feel comfortable in the academic arena.*

(PPS-3)

Dlamini (2002) confirm the assertion that, there is a need for counselling services to be provided in colleges and universities where pregnant students are found. Mamhute (2011) added that the college administration could establish an office for counselling of pregnant and nursing student mothers. Besides, formal peer education programmes for student mothers should be organised. Such programmes would allow student mothers and would-be-mothers to share experiences regarding educational challenges faced when studentship and motherhood are combined.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study the following conclusions could be drawn:

- Most of the participants in the study believed the pregnant students at the university experienced some difficulties in their academic work because the available facilities as well as their colleagues and lecturers in the institution do not support their condition or situation.
- Most of the pregnant students at the university cope with the challenges they faced by ignoring their bodily discomforts, denying the painful comments from colleague students and lecturers and taking encouragement from them.
- The pregnant students face some challenges but the severity of those challenges depended on the level of experiences in pregnancy.
- The pregnant students were aware of the various counselling services for them at the university, but most of them did not avail themselves to such facilities because most of the programs were not specifically for the pregnant students, rather for the entire student body.

#### V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

- It emerged from the data that some students and lecturers were rude to the pregnant students because they did not understand their situation as pregnant students. Therefore, the university counselling centre should educate students and lecturers on how to handle and associate with the pregnant students and treat them as individuals with special needs.
- The study also revealed that the pregnant students mostly get disturbed, depressed, confused, unhappy and angry as a result of their challenges. The counsellors at the university should therefore organize programs specifically for pregnant students to help

them combine their two conflicting roles successfully. This could be done through group counselling and radio programs to address the specific problems of the pregnant students.

- It emerged from the data that the pregnant students need adequate facilities at the university to make them feel comfortable in the academic environment. The university should therefore, provide comfortable place of residence, attach urinals to all lecture theatres, provide comfortable chairs at all lecture theatres as well as resting rooms for the pregnant students.

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