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## BEING STUDENTS AND MOTHERS: STORIES OF STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE

By  
Refi Aksep Sativa  
Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang  
E-mail: [refi.sativa@fkip.unsika.ac.id](mailto:refi.sativa@fkip.unsika.ac.id)

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**Abstract:** *Balancing the dual roles of being a student and a mother presents unique challenges, particularly for graduate students who face demanding academic and personal responsibilities. This study investigated the lived experiences of graduate student mothers, focusing on the challenges they faced and the strategies they employed to navigate their dual roles. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the difficulties that graduate student mothers face and their coping strategies for 'balancing' academic and parenting responsibilities. This study used a narrative-based case study as the research design, recruiting three graduate student mothers from three different universities. Personal narrative and semi structured interviews were used to gather data to provide a more in-depth understanding of the context. This study was intended to shed more light on the challenges that graduate student mothers encounter, with the hope that others interested in pursuing higher studies can learn from the participants' stories and consider their experiences before making the "big commitment" of entering academia. It was also hoped that other stakeholders, such as faculty staff and policymakers, would be able to generate a place for more "mother-friendly" programs.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Higher education has long served as a gateway to career advancement, personal growth, and social mobility. In recent decades, significant attention has been given to understanding the experiences of women who continue their education to higher level while serving as the primary caregiver for their children (Bosch, 2013; Harrington, 2013; Torres et al., 2020). For women, pursuing graduate studies often carries additional layers of complexity, especially when combined with caregiving responsibilities (Moghadam et al., 2017; Smith, 2019). The decision to return to school is not merely an academic pursuit but also a personal commitment to self-improvement and a strategic step toward professional advancement (Cabaguino, 2017; Eversole et al., 2015). However, the dual roles of being a mother and a student create unique challenges, requiring constant negotiation between academic demands and familial responsibilities.

Academic motherhood—juggling academic pursuits and the responsibilities of motherhood—has emerged as a significant area of interest in education and gender studies. These dual roles often present competing demands, resulting in what scholars' term "role conflict," where the expectations of one role interfere with the fulfillment of the others (Balogun, 2019; Spilovoy, 2014; Torres et al., 2020). Mothers in academia often find themselves at the intersection of two demanding spheres, navigating societal expectations and institutional pressures.

This study draws upon key theoretical perspectives that provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of student mothers, including role theory and feminist theory. Role theory posits that individuals occupy multiple social roles, each with its own set of expectations, behaviors, and obligations (Biddle, 1986). For student mothers, the dual roles of being both a caregiver and a graduate student often led to role conflict, where fulfilling the expectations of one role interferes with meeting the demands of the other (Balogun, 2019; Spilovoy, 2014). Goode (1960) concept of role strain further explains how the competing demands of multiple roles can result in stress and decreased well-being. This theoretical lens helps in understanding the tensions that arise when student mothers strive to balance academic deadlines with caregiving duties.

Feminist theory offers a critical lens through which to examine the gendered nature of academic experiences. Feminist scholars argue that societal norms and institutional structures often place disproportionate burdens on women, particularly those who are mothers (Bosch, 2013; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). This perspective emphasizes the need for systemic changes in higher education to accommodate the unique needs of student mothers, such as flexible scheduling, childcare support, and equitable academic policies. By situating the study within a feminist framework, this research advocates for more inclusive academic environments that recognize and value the contributions of women in academia.

Women in academia face unique pressures, as both spheres require significant time, energy, and emotional labor. This dual responsibility often leads to role strain, where individuals struggle to balance the demands of both roles effectively. According to Bosch (2013), academic motherhood is characterized by a constant negotiation of priorities, with women often having to make trade-offs between their professional aspirations and familial responsibilities. Moreover, time management is a pervasive challenge for student mothers. Smith (2019) emphasizes that poor time management can lead to burnout, reducing both academic performance and quality of parenting. Besides, lack of Institutional Support: Institutions often fail to accommodate the unique needs of student mothers. The absence of flexible schedules, childcare facilities, and mental health resources leaves many women feeling isolated and unsupported. Mamabolo et al., (2009) argue that institutional barriers disproportionately impact women, reinforcing gender disparities in academia.

Existing research predominantly focuses on undergraduate student mothers (Mamabolo et al., 2009; Spilovoy, 2014). However, the experiences of graduate student mothers remain underexplored, despite their unique challenges. Graduate programs often demand greater independence, rigorous research commitments, and intensive coursework (Battle & Wigfield, 2003) amplifying the complexity of balancing academic and maternal roles. While some studies have examined the dual roles of motherhood and academia, the specific experiences of graduate student mothers navigating institutional, familial, and

personal challenges simultaneously are insufficiently addressed. This gap leaves unanswered questions about their coping mechanisms, the role of support systems, and the institutional reforms necessary to better accommodate them.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the lived experiences of graduate student mothers within the Indonesian context, a setting that remains largely underrepresented in existing literature. By exploring these narratives, this study provided unique insights into how cultural, social, and institutional factors intersect to shape the experiences of academic motherhood. Furthermore, it highlighted strategies and adaptive mechanisms employed by student mothers to overcome these challenges, offering practical recommendations that can inform policy and practice in both local and global contexts.

This study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What challenges do graduate student mothers encounter during their studies?
2. How do graduate student mothers overcome these challenges?

By examining these questions, the study contributed to the growing body of literature on academic motherhood. It highlighted the unique struggles faced by graduate student mothers and offers practical recommendations for institutions to better support this demographic. Additionally, the study hoped to inspire women considering higher education by showcasing the strength and adaptability of those who have successfully navigated this journey. Furthermore, it provided stakeholders, including faculty and policymakers, with insights to create more inclusive and mother-friendly academic environments.

## **METHODE**

This study adopted a qualitative, narrative-based case study design to explore the lived experiences of graduate student mothers. This approach was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, allowing their stories to reveal the complexities of balancing academic and familial responsibilities (Creswell, 2007; Hyde-Clarke, 2016). By focusing on personal narratives, the research aimed to capture the nuanced realities and emotional dimensions of academic motherhood, offering rich insights into participants' challenges and coping mechanisms. This approach enabled the researcher to delve into the personal and contextual factors influencing participants' academic and maternal roles, providing a holistic view of their lived realities.

The study employed purposeful sampling to recruit participants who met the following criteria: (a) graduate students, (b) mothers of at least one child, and (c) currently enrolled in graduate programs at three different universities in Indonesia. Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit the participants to make the most efficient use of limited resources (Patton, 2015; Rai & Thapa, 2019). Participants were identified through professional networks and social media platforms. Invitations to participate were sent via WhatsApp, including a brief explanation of the study and an informed consent form. Three participants agreed to join the study, representing diverse academic disciplines, family dynamics, and geographic locations. The demographic profiles of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Elements	Refi	Dina	Karin
University	Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI)	Universitas Indonesia (UI)	Universitas Sumatra Utara (USU)
Age	32 years old	31	32 years old
Marital status	Married	Married	Married
Length of Married	3.5 years	2 years	7 years
Number of Children	1 (2.5 years old)	1 (1 year old)	2 (6 years and 2 years old)
Location	Banjarmasin	Tangerang	Medan
Ethnicity	Minangkabau	Sunda	Batak
Religion	Islam	Islam	Christian
Work experience	Private institution	Private institution	Government institution

**Table 1. Participants' Demographic**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and personal narratives. The interviews were conducted via recorded phone calls with participants' consent, allowing for a detailed exploration of their experiences. A flexible interview guide with open-ended questions was used to encourage participants to share their stories in their own words. Questions focused on their motivations for pursuing graduate studies, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they employed to navigate their dual roles. In addition to the interviews, participants were asked to provide personal narratives about their experiences as student mothers. These narratives offered further context and depth, complementing the data gathered during the interviews. The combination of interviews and narratives ensured a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes in the data. This process involved several steps: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and narratives, (2) coding significant statements and phrases, (3) grouping codes into themes, and (4) reviewing themes for coherence and alignment with the research questions. The analysis was iterative, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data while ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' experiences. To enhance the reliability of the analysis, peer debriefing and member checking were conducted, with participants reviewing the interpreted themes to confirm their accuracy.

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and procedures. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were securely stored to maintain confidentiality. Participants were also given the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed several themes emerged from the interviews and the narrative essays. The three superordinate themes answering the research questions related to (a) motivation and the needs of pursuing higher education, (b) challenges throughout the academic journey, and (c) strategies for academic motherhood.

### *Motivation of Pursuing Higher Education*

Graduate student mothers in this study were driven by a combination of personal and professional aspirations. Refi, for example, emphasized her desire for professional growth and to remain competitive in the field of English language education. Refi was an English teacher working for a private institution for more than seven years. Besides teaching, she was also responsible to give induction and trainings for teachers, observed the classes, and evaluate teachers' performances. Moreover, she was involved in the process of recruiting new teachers for the language school. Having had a stable job, Refi decided to resign from her position. Then, she applied for a scholarship and continued her Master degree. Her motivation pursuing higher education is elaborated in the following excerpt.

"I needed time to reflect on myself and my professional growth. I chose to come back to school before it was too late. I realized that I needed to upgrade and update my knowledge and skills in English language education especially with the rapid changes of technology and issues in education". (Refi)

The above excerpt indicates that the needs of professional growth and qualification for a job position become Refi's main reasons to get back to school. Settling with her teaching career was not an option for Refi as she realized that she needed to have certain qualification for her future career. She also emphasized the urge to enhance her knowledge and skills in English education.

Similarly, Dina's decision to pursue graduate studies was motivated by her ambition to transition into academia. Despite her extensive work experience, she viewed higher education as a necessary step toward achieving her goal of becoming a lecturer. She also applied for scholarship and continued her education. She wanted to be a lecturer. In order to apply for that position, Dina had to have minimum a Master's degree. Her intention is described in this excerpt:

"In order to become a lecturer, I had to find a linear major, namely communication. In terms of work background, I also had a lot to do with marketing, public relations, and managerial. Therefore, I take the communication science at the Universitas Indonesia". (Dina)

From the excerpt above, it can be understood that the main reason for Dina going back to school was because she aimed for a specific career. Despite of having extensive working experience, Dina determined to proceed into academia and be an educator. Additionally, Karin was a government employee when she continued her education. She explained:

"I currently study Management and Valuation Property as it is in line with my long-goal career" (Karin)

Karin's choice of study reflects her long-term career aspirations, indicating a clear focus on building a future in property management or real estate valuation. This demonstrates her commitment to acquiring relevant knowledge and skills that will help her achieve her professional goals. The findings suggest that professional advancement, coupled with personal fulfillment, plays a pivotal role in motivating student mothers to pursue higher education. This aligns with existing literature that highlights career development and personal growth as primary motivators for women in academia (Spilovoy, 2014). Professional advancement and personal fulfillment are key motivators for student mothers pursuing higher education, consistent with literature emphasizing women's career



development and personal growth in academia.

#### *Challenges throughout the Academic Journey*

Student mothers often encounter a unique set of challenges as they navigate the demands of academic life while balancing their responsibilities as caregivers. One of the most prominent obstacles they face is the constant struggle to balance their academic workload with the needs of their children. The time and energy required to attend lectures, complete assignments, and prepare for exams often conflict with the unpredictable demands of parenting, such as feeding, nurturing, and attending to the emotional and developmental needs of their children. Refi shared her struggle to prioritize tasks, often having her child sit beside her during online classes:

“I have difficulties to choose priority. Often time, I have my daughter sits next to me in a zoom meeting. I will set up YouTube channels or some toys to keep her busy.” (Refi)

Dina’s experience highlighted the compounded challenges of health issues and caregiving responsibilities. During her online studies, she had challenges in finding daycare or helper to take care of her son. She recalled:

“In the second semester, my husband and son got TB, and I had to take care of their health. The pandemic also made it impossible to have a domestic helper. These challenges affected my focus and energy for learning.” (Dina)

Karin echoed similar difficulties, emphasizing the mental strain of juggling multiple roles. She faced difficulties to fully concentrate on her studies especially when her children were sick or needed her attention. Karin stated:

“The challenge that I have experienced so far is how to manage my time well between playing the role of a student and a mother. Sometimes when we are in college, like it or not, the children are asking for something or getting sick, it is difficult to split concentration it.” (Karin)

These findings align with studies that identify time constraints, lack of institutional support, and the emotional toll of caregiving as key challenges for student mothers (Smith, 2019; Torres et al., 2020). Additionally, the pandemic exacerbated these difficulties, underscoring the need for flexible policies to support academic mothers.

#### *Strategies for Academic Motherhood*

Navigating the challenges of motherhood while pursuing an academic career requires a unique set of strategies that support both personal and professional success. Academic motherhood is often a balancing act, as it involves managing the demands of scholarly responsibilities, research, teaching, and service, while simultaneously meeting the needs of children and family life. Effective strategies for academic mothers can help minimize stress, foster productivity, and ensure well-being, all while cultivating a fulfilling academic career. Despite the challenges, the participants demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness. Dina emphasized the importance of adaptability and collaboration with her husband:

“I tried to accept reality and adapt. My husband helped with house chores and taking care of our son. During exams, I sought help from neighbors or my mother to look after my child”. (Dina)

Karin highlighted the critical role of communication and support from her family:

“We need people around us for support. Communication is key. For example,

during exams, I explained to my husband the need for uninterrupted study time.”  
(Karin)

Refi adapted by outsourcing tasks when necessary:

“I often ordered food online and used laundry services during morning and afternoon classes to save time.” (Refi)

These strategies underscore the importance of support systems and adaptability in managing the dual roles of student and mother. Participants relied on family, community, and practical solutions to navigate their responsibilities, echoing findings from previous research (Bosch, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the resilience and resourcefulness of graduate student mothers as they navigate the complexities of academic motherhood. Despite significant challenges such as time constraints, lack of institutional support, and the emotional toll of balancing dual roles, participants demonstrated remarkable adaptability and determination. Their experiences underscore the interplay between personal aspirations, familial responsibilities, and cultural expectations, highlighting the unique struggles faced by this demographic.

The findings emphasize the importance of institutional reforms to support graduate student mothers. Flexible academic schedules, accessible childcare facilities, and robust mental health resources are critical to alleviating the challenges identified in this study. Institutions must also cultivate a culture of understanding and inclusivity, ensuring that policies and practices account for the diverse realities of student mothers. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on academic motherhood by providing insights into the lived experiences of graduate student mothers within the Indonesian context. It underscores the need for further studies to explore the intersection of cultural, institutional, and personal factors shaping these experiences. Longitudinal research could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these challenges and coping mechanisms evolve over time.

To support student mothers more effectively, institutions should develop mother-friendly policies, such as offering flexible course schedules, online learning options, and academic extensions tailored to their needs. Providing on-campus childcare facilities or forming partnerships with local childcare providers could significantly reduce the caregiving burden on student mothers. In addition, universities should establish support networks and peer mentoring programs to foster a sense of community and shared understanding among student mothers. Policymakers can contribute by allocating funding to initiatives that support women in academia, particularly those addressing the unique challenges faced by student mothers. They should also encourage universities to integrate gender-sensitive policies that prioritize equity and inclusivity. Future research should explore the experiences of student mothers across different cultural and institutional contexts to identify commonalities and unique challenges. Moreover, investigating the long-term impacts of academic motherhood on professional and personal trajectories, as well as the role of extended family and community networks, can provide deeper insights. By fostering inclusive policies and practices, institutions can empower women to pursue their academic

and professional goals without compromising their familial responsibilities.

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