

Obligations, Challenges, and Coping Mechanisms for Women in Tertiary Education: A Case Study of Women's University in Africa

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Abstract

The goal of this paper was to ascertain the societal obligations, challenges and coping mechanisms adopted by female students at the Women's University in Africa, in Zimbabwe, in pursuit of tertiary education. Descriptive Statistics showed that the obligations militating against their education were spousal role, raising family, community responsibilities, and work-related demands. The challenges on their studies were exorbitant fees, drastic lifestyle changes, family quality time, welfare needs at the university, and family role demands. Significant associations were revealed between the students' demographic factors and either obligations or challenges. The students' academic life coping mechanisms were studying at night, study groups, and prompt assignments completion. Their social life coping mechanisms were seeking external sources of funds for their studies and spiritual guidance. The students felt that both guidance and counseling and financial aid should be integrated in the university to cushion and promote academic excellence.

Key Words: obligations, challenges, coping, female students, academic pursuit

1. Introduction

The patriarchal nature of the African society relegated women to the custodianship of household chores for the better part of their lives, which negatively affected their professional pursuit and development. The main challenge of post-independence African nations has been to effect gender balance in almost all sectors of life, and especially in education. Educational reforms in terms of gender balance seeks to ensure access and retention of female students through the establishment of support systems that accommodate their societal obligations, challenges and needs and hence promote their academic pursuit. The Women's University in Africa was established in 2002 with the goals of addressing gender disparity and fostering equity in university education. The university's goals are premised on the core values of gender sensitivity, academic freedom, integrity, social responsibility and transparency. However, such positive developments' results are adversely affected by the societal expectations and roles of women which tend to threaten women's learning ability and academic performance. The Module II programs introduced in Kenyan Universities (Wainaina, 2011a) noted that gender roles influenced student enrolment. UNESCO (2003) identified gender inequality as one of the main challenges on higher education in sub-Saharan Africa. Wainaina (2011b) observed that direct and opportunistic costs, socio-cultural distance and health factors were some of the undesirable barriers to gender equality in education. Coping is the conscious, rational way of dealing with the anxieties of life (Reber, 1985) which is reflected in the self-protection strategies adopted by the individual (Kashden *et al*, 2006).

Proper application of such strategies allows individuals to resolve problems, relieve emotional distress, and stay on track towards achieving their goals (Brown *et al*, 2005). Alongside the students' coping mechanisms, institutes of higher learning must put in place support systems to ensure that students achieve their academic endeavors in conducive and supportive environments. Support systems such as financial aid, and guidance and counseling should be an essential part of the fabric of every university faculty (Owen, 2002) to enhance student retention. Lawrence *et al*, (2006) argued that students should be encouraged to use the support mechanisms as a matter of course rather than turning to them when they have problems. This paper seeks to investigate the societal obligations and challenges faced by female students in their academic pursuit and the coping mechanisms they are employing to ensure their progress and ultimate success.

2. Data and methodology

A sample consisting of 105 female students at Women's University in Africa was randomly selected for the study and 93 completed the questionnaires giving a response rate of 88.6%. The sampling technique used was stratified sampling, where the students were grouped into three strata of the Faculties of Management and Entrepreneurship, Social Sciences and Gender and Development studies, and Agriculture, respectively. Simple random samples were then selected proportionally to the student population in each faculty by the academic year of study.

A questionnaire was administered for the collection of data. The collected data were captured and analyzed using SPSS version 16. Explorative data analysis was conducted using Descriptive Statistics to ascertain the main obligations and challenges that were impacting negatively on the studies of female students as well as to describe the social and academic life coping mechanisms women were employing to ensure that their academic pursuit stayed on course. Chi-square tests of association were used to determine dependence between their demographic factors and the obligations and challenges militating against their studies. Multiple response frequency analyses were used to determine the main coping mechanisms employed by the female students in their academic and social lives to ensure that they remained focused in their academic pursuit. Proportions were used to assess the female students' opinion on the need for support mechanisms on financial aid, and guidance and counseling to be established at the Women's University in Africa.

3. Results

The 93 respondents had the following faculty representation, 28.2% from the Faculty of Management and Entrepreneurship, 60.9% from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Gender and Development studies, and 10.9% from the Faculty of Agriculture. Sixty-three percent of the sampled students were in their final year of studies, 25% were second year students and 12% were first year students. The majority of the students, 56.5%, were less than 30 years old; 40.9% of them were single, 40.9% were married, 10.8% were divorced, 4.3% were widowed, and 3.2% were single parents. Fifty percent of the students were unemployed, 34.8% were formally employed and 15.2% were self-employed.

The main obligations impeding the academic endeavors of the female students were work-related demands (27.5%), raising family (26.8%), community responsibilities (*such as church and social club roles*) (24.6%) and spousal role (21.1%). Significant associations were revealed between age groups and the following obligations: work-related demands ($p\text{-value}=0.005$), raising family ($p\text{-value}<0.001$), community responsibilities ($p\text{-value}=0.01$), and spousal role ($p\text{-value}=0.024$), notably for age groups 30 – 39 years and 40 – 49 years. Consequentially, significant associations were exhibited between marital status and work-related demands ($p\text{-value}=0.034$), raising family ($p\text{-value}<0.001$), especially for the married, widowed, divorced and single parent female students; and community responsibilities ($p\text{-value}=0.016$), notably for the widows and divorced female students. A significant association was exhibited between employment status and raising family ($p\text{-value}=0.034$), notably for both the self-employed and formally employed female students.

The students' main challenges in their academic pursuits were exorbitant fees (26.2%), drastic change to lifestyles (22.3%), family quality time was adversely affected (19.2%); food and sundry needs at the University (17.6%), and family role demands (14.7%). A statistically significant association was revealed between age groups and the following challenge; week-end classes were exhaustive ($p\text{-value}=0.007$), especially for all other age groups except for those less than 30 years old.

Significant associations were revealed between marital status and the following challenges to the female students' academic pursuit: exhaustiveness of week-end classes ($p\text{-value}=0.004$) and family role demands ($p\text{-value}=0.009$) for all statuses except the singles. Social networks at school were not being understood by family ($p\text{-value}=0.045$) especially for the married and single parents.

The most common coping mechanisms employed by the female students in their academic life were that they engaged in their studies at night when other family members were asleep (49.1%), engaged in group studies (33%), and made sure that they did their assignments promptly (17.9%). These mechanisms were significantly associated with the marital status of the female students ($p\text{-value}=0.011$), where the married, single parents and widows opted to study at night when other family members had gone to sleep, the divorced engaged private tutors, and the singles either did their assignments promptly or engaged in group studies. The most prevalently adopted coping mechanisms of the female students in their social lives to ensure that their academic pursuit stayed on course were that they raised money by alternate means (41%), either from boyfriends and secretly from relatives to keep up, they took loans for their fees (32.4%) to ensure that they maintained their family's social status, and others sought spiritual guidance (26.6%). There were no significant associations between the social life coping mechanisms and the demographic factors of the female students.

The students felt that the following support systems should be established within the University to promote their academic pursuit: guidance and counseling facility (87.1%) and financial aid (92.5%).

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

We conclude that the main obligations militating against female students' pursuit of academic excellence were spousal role, raising family, community responsibilities, and work-related demands. The main challenges impeding their tertiary education were exorbitant fees, drastic change in lifestyles, family quality time, food and sundry (*welfare*) needs at the University and family role demands. Significant associations were revealed between the students' demographic factors and either the main obligations and challenges showing that age group, marital and employment status had a bearing on their academic pursuit. The students' main academic life coping mechanisms were studying at night, group studies and completing their assignments promptly, showing that they placed a special value on their societal expectations and demands and hence had to balance these with their studies. A significant association was shown between the marital status of the female students and their academic life coping mechanisms, with the married, single parents and widows studying at night after other family members had gone to sleep and the divorced engaging private tutors and the singles opting either for study groups or doing their assignments promptly.

The study showed that their social life coping mechanisms were seeking external sources of funds either from relatives or through loans, and spiritual guidance. These indicate that they did not want to see their academic life impacting negatively on the welfare of their families and peers. The female students felt that guidance and counseling facilities and financial aid should be instituted in the University's structures so as to cushion them from societal obligations and challenges and hence promote their academic pursuit. We recommend that support mechanisms be implemented in universities to ensure female students access and retention and hence help them achieve academic excellence as they provide a cushion for them from the societal obligations and challenges. We further recommend that such studies be carried out in universities with composite students, because the Women's University in Africa is dominated by female students (*almost 85%*) hence the influence of challenges of loneliness, vulnerability to sexual and emotional abuse, and peer pressure were suppressed in this study, yet they are profound in regards to self-esteem and performance.

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