

Abstract

Kenyan university students who are also mothers shape their own identities within the constraints of their university and their society, which in turn are shaped by transnational flows of information, ideologies, and resources. Neither the Kenyan government nor the universities provide services or resources for students with children. Many live in a slum outside of the university gates, without electricity and running water, making academic success and caregiving challenging. Based on participant observation and interviews at a public university in Kenya, this paper discusses the experiences of the mothers and three themes that emerged: shame at being a single mother, righteousness at not having an abortion, and pride in being a woman who can succeed as a student and a parent. These competing moral narratives, which were sometimes expressed by the same person, reflect the complex terrain that young women navigate and construct around gender, sexuality, and motherhood.

Biography

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Narratives of Morality: Shame, Righteousness, and Gender Equity among Kenyan University Students who are Mothers

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We Africans, you [single mothers] end up not getting so much support. Now in my case, as a divorcee, there is a way you are regarded, kind of like you are a shame to the family. So you being in that home doesn't make the parents very comfortable.

--Nancy¹, a 29-year-old divorced mother of two and a third-year university student, explaining why she doesn't go home for vacations.

When I tell people I'm a mother, they don't believe me. I was the last person they thought would get a baby. No one ever saw me with a man. I've become a role model. If I did it, you can do it. You're not weaker than me. When they get pregnant, they come to me and say, "Should I keep it or should I destroy it?" I tell them, "Keep it." ... I'm an inspiration to them. They fear to be associated with motherhood. ... I want them to be proud mothers.

--Lily, a 25-year-old single mother of one and a fourth-year university student.

INTRODUCTION

Nancy explained that she brings shame to her family because she is a divorced mother, and she labels that shame as an "African" association. On the other hand, Lily proclaimed her strength as a single mother and expressed pride in not having an abortion. For Kenyan university students who have children, motherhood is shaped and contested within a transnational context, with sexual immorality, abortion, and gender equity all positioned as Western imports. People embrace, reject, and/or reinterpret these ideologies that flow across borders. As we will show in this paper, the student mothers' shame was linked to violating "Kenyan" or sometimes "African" norms of sexuality and motherhood. By not having abortions, they claimed to uphold "Kenyan" values. But they did not completely oppose what they see as Western norms of gender equity; rather they drew on both "Kenyan" and "Western" influences in crafting their identities. The terms in quotes do not necessarily apply to practices or ideologies that stem from these geographic places, but rather they serve as shorthand for loosely defined yet widely shared understandings. We will provide examples of these constellations of meanings throughout the paper, but in this context, we found that "American" and "Western" generally signify gender equity, promiscuity, and abortion, whereas "Kenyan" and "African" generally signify distinct gender roles, chastity, and a rejection of cultural imperialism. The competing moral narratives about university students becoming mothers—which were sometimes expressed by the same person—are shaped by historical and contemporary debates over gender within Kenya. In this paper, we will reveal not only the challenges and needs of Kenyan university students who are mothers, but also the moral narratives they express. These narratives reflect changing and contested understandings of motherhood, gender, and sexuality, and of normative paths to

adulthood which assume delayed childbearing for female university students. These findings extend scholarship on gender, higher education, and international development by showing that increasing educational attainment for women and promoting gender equity do go hand-in-hand, but over a rocky and distinct terrain. Understanding the specific institutional, societal, and cultural contexts for women university students is essential to promoting their achievement, and thus international development.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

After a history of gender bias in education (Eshiwani 1985; Otiende and Njoroge 2001), Kenya is close to achieving gender parity in *secondary* school enrollment (Shabaya and Konadu-Agyemang 2004). However, as of 2005, only 37% of *tertiary* education students were women (UNESCO 2007, 132). Furthermore, university admissions in Kenya are highly selective: only about 5% of students who take the national exam at the end of secondary school are selected for public university (Onsongo 2006). Those women who do make it to university are a minority among their fellow university students, and also a minority among women their age. As Morley, Leach, and Lugg (2009) explain, increasing women's participation in higher education in sub-Saharan Africa is challenging and multi-faceted. Motherhood is one reason some women either do not enter university or drop out. Neither the Kenyan government nor most universities provide services or resources for students with children.

This paper is based on research at Provincial University's Gender Studies Institute (GSI), which provides support and services to student mothers even though GSI does not receive funding from the Provincial University administration for these activities². Arguably, the university administration gives student parents fewer resources than other students, causing difficulties with both child-rearing and academic success. Student parents are not allowed to live in student housing with their children, resulting in many living outside of the university gates in a slum without electricity and running water. In some instances, students may be forced to attend make-up lectures³ late in the evening. This makes it difficult for student mothers to attend as they may have to walk long distances to get to their areas of accommodation, which are often outside campus grounds. Student mothers cannot stay late due to security concerns about walking at night through campus and through the slum where they live. In addition to housing, student mothers' other major needs are medical care and money for food and clothing.

While specifics vary from university to university, in general, Kenyan public universities' approach to pregnancy is not supportive of women. In fact, these universities often uphold a double standard since student fathers are never pushed out of campus accommodation. The 2004 Provincial University handbook says that students who are expectant should vacate the university halls of residence three months prior to delivery "because pregnancy inhibits academic performance" (35)⁴. At District University, which was formerly a constituent college of Provincial University, the 2004 manual for orientation reads that "services for maternity are not given, and expectant students must leave the halls of residence - at least 90 days prior to the expected delivery date" (30). While this study's findings about the student mothers' experiences cannot be generalized to other universities, the context of minimal or no institutional support for student mothers was common to all the Kenyan universities.⁵

While limited research has been done in Africa as a whole on university students who are parents, a similar qualitative inquiry conducted at a teachers' college in Zimbabwe found that lack of institutional support was a major problem for students who were also mothers (Van den Berg and Mamhute 2013). They also found that peer support was essential for the academic success of student parents. Students who missed class were given lecture notes by their classmates, and would often benefit from discussions with their classmates to review the missed material. Student mothers took advantage of their class networks to obtain notes for lectures they missed while they were either attending to their young ones or were unable to walk long distances with their infants. Van den Berg and Mamhute (2013) found that student mothers were highly likely to experience withdrawal of parental support as a result of their pregnancy. Thus, most had to cope without either parental or institutional support. As we discuss below, the student mothers in our study did have conflicts with their parents, but generally the parents were most worried about them dropping out of university.

Research in the United States and Canada points to many similar practical and emotional challenges for student mothers. Lynch (2008) found that problems relating to financial aid, health insurance, childcare, and feeling unsupported by faculty and academic departments contributed to high dropout rates for graduate students who are mothers. The burden of numerous roles and responsibilities can add stress, and more women drop out of campus than men for non-academic reasons (Home 1998; Lynch 2008). On the positive side, Wilsey (2013) found that college students who were mothers were motivated to succeed in order to provide for their children, a theme expressed by our interviewees as well. Yet, some of the emotional issues we identified were quite different from those identified in the U.S. Estes (2011) found that American student parents experienced contradictory pressures to be good students and good parents. These pressures likely stem in part from the pervasive ideology of intensive motherhood (Hays 1996), which asserts that child care is the responsibility of each individual mother who must invest a great deal of time, energy, and money into her children.

The Kenyan student mothers did not express concern about being good mothers. This could be due to the fact that the ideology of intensive motherhood is not prevalent in Kenya and care by members of the extended family and/or paid child care is more widely accepted. Instead, we found that the student mothers expressed tensions between two competing models of adult womanhood and the life course. In one model, the woman who has attained one of the scarce and coveted university spots is supposed to dedicate herself to academic success, thereby obtaining a secure job in the government, corporate, or NGO sector, and then marry and have children. For women who did not achieve the "golden ticket" of university entry, the model is that marriage and childbearing could and should take place earlier. For the students who became mothers during university, their pregnancy was a "biological disruption". The term *biological disruption* was coined in Du Plessis and Celliers's study of HIV-positive mothers in South Africa, who found that the HIV diagnosis dislocated "relationships, marriages, practical concerns, and taken-for-granted assumptions about gendered embodiment and everyday life" (2013, 314). While it may seem extreme to compare pregnancy to an HIV diagnosis, the women in our study expressed similar feelings of being contaminated but also determined to overcome stigma. Ultimately, they rejected the premise that these models of womanhood are in competition.

Based on participant observation and interviews at Provincial University, this paper discusses the experiences of the mothers. Three themes emerged: shame at being a single mother, righteousness at not having an abortion, and pride in being an independent woman who can succeed as a student and a parent. In all these themes, contested notions of “African” and “Western” identities and behaviors circulated and were claimed, rejected, or repurposed. Delving into the specificities of the student mothers’ experiences shows the situated construction of gender and how it intersects with other social categories. It also intersects with the biological fact of pregnancy, giving university students who become fathers very different options. In the remainder of the paper, we present the challenges and needs of university students who are also mothers, in order to make concrete suggestions for how to improve student mothers’ likelihood of completing university.

We also argue that in order to remove the stigma and barriers to academic success for student mothers, it is necessary to understand how pregnancy and parenting shape women’s experiences and identities in a public Kenyan university. Furthermore, we show how they conceptualize and articulate those identities in relation to larger transnational shifts around gender, sexuality, and mothering.

METHODS

Nancy and Lily, whose quotes introduce this paper, were students at Provincial University in Kenya during the 2004-2005 academic year. During this time, the first author was a Fulbright Scholar at the Gender Studies Institute (GSI) and the second author was the Director. During 2012-2013, the third author was a student at Provincial University and chair of the Gender Equity Team, which collaborated on advocating for the changes discussed at the end of the paper. GSI sponsors the Gender Equity Team, a club for promoting gender equity on and off campus.

In 2003, GSI founded the Student Mothers Alliance, a club for and led by student mothers. Most of the club members were pursuing baccalaureate degrees and had recently finished secondary school. However, because students receiving public funding have to wait to begin university, most were between 20 and 25 years old. Generally, 10-15 students attended each meeting, with a core group of 5-7 students attending regularly, and others attending occasionally. About 30 female students at any time were identified by GSI staff and student organizers as having children. However, the total number of student mothers at the university is not known for reasons discussed below.⁶

After eight months of participant observation with the Student Mothers Alliance in 2004-2005, including attending weekly meetings and participating in other activities, the first author interviewed 12 of the participants about their experiences bearing and raising children while attending university (see Table 1 for demographic information on the interviewees). Announcements about the study were made at several meetings in a row and attendees were invited to either sign up for interviews or contact the first author directly.⁷ Based on our knowledge of the population from participant-observation, the interviewees were very similar in terms of marriage and other demographic information to the student mothers who attended regularly, and in somewhat better circumstances than those who only attended occasionally.

Most of the paper is based on those interviews and field notes, with additional material for the 2004-2005 period coming from document analysis. A brief section at the end of the paper highlights some changes and continuities since 2005, drawing on document analysis and the second and third authors' observations.

TABLE 1: *Interviewees' Demographic Information (2004-2005)*

Age at time of interview⁸	Number of interviewees
21	1
22	2
23	1
24	2
25	5
29	1
Marital Status of Interviewees	
Married	4
Single	5
Separated/Divorced	2
Unmarried but in relationship with baby's father	1
Year in university	
2 nd year	4
3 rd year	2
4 th year	6
Number of children at time of interview	
1 child	9
2 children	3
Total Interviewees	12

FINDINGS

The student mothers are a heterogeneous group but can be classified into two main categories. Students in the first category are in stable and supportive marriages or have financial and/or emotional help from their family of origin. These students face the challenge of completing their studies and raising their children. While they experience some stress over a sick baby or a partner who is far away, generally they cope well with their dual responsibilities. These students are more likely to be in an official or unofficial leadership role in the student club and feel an obligation to help the others who experience greater stressors. For example, Lydia, a founding member of the Student Mothers Alliance, received financial support from her husband and did not have to worry about money. "There are times when the baby is sick, and I don't sleep," Lydia said when interviewed. "Other days, life is smooth."

Students in the second category are raising their children on their own with minimal or no support from the baby's father or other family members. Sometimes family members do provide childcare, but that can itself be a source of conflict. For example, one student was trying to get her children away from their father's family. Students in this group have attempted suicide, have

dropped or have come close to dropping out of university, and/or have gone hungry. While none of the interviewees dropped out, a few talked about coming close to doing so. In group meetings, specific students who had dropped out were discussed as a cautionary tale, and the general issue of dropping out was a frequent topic of conversation. They identified undergraduate student mothers as more vulnerable and more likely to drop out than graduate students⁹. Students raising their children without familial support are more likely to come from poor families in rural areas and are more often the first in their family to go to university. For example, Gladys comes from a single mother family in a rural area. She barely made it through secondary school because of the need to pay fees. As a student mother, her financial problems have gotten worse. Gladys talked about her problems after the baby was born.

First and foremost, I did not have a house help [domestic employee], then I did not have money to buy food. I went without a single meal for seven days. My boyfriend just told me that he did not have money, that I should defer studies and go home.

His lack of support developed into emotional and physical abuse, as will be discussed below. Unlike in the interviews, suicide and sexual violence/abuse were not discussed during the group meetings, or only in the most veiled terms, in exhortations to persist and succeed “despite what may have happened to you.”¹⁰

In this paper, we discuss a tension between the three recurring themes observed at many of the meetings and expressed by interviewees in both categories mentioned above, though to varying degrees: shame due to single motherhood, righteousness for not having an abortion, and the pride of being a successful student mother. As we will show, these emotions were expressed in narratives that were strongly linked to ideas about what is Kenyan (or African) versus what is Western (or American). Yet, as practices and ideologies circulate across borders they are reshaped and sometimes reclaimed. Discussing family planning in a rural region of Kenya, Watkins suggests that local networks “alter indigenous cultural models of sexual behavior and domesticate foreign ones” (2000, 750). The student mothers’ narratives repackage and reinterpret local and transnational discourses, which do not necessarily reflect sexual and reproductive practices. For example, in 1993, about one-fourth of Kenyan women ages 20 to 24 had a premarital birth, yet “premarital abstinence is aggressively promoted” (Mensch et al. 1999).

Shame

As Nancy said in the initial quote, she feels she shames her parents because she violates their “African” norms. The student mothers who are single or divorced all expressed shame or the fear of being judged—a few expressed this in the context of their home or family, and all expressed it in the context of the university. Jessica, who was single, already had a baby when she began university. She knew about the Student Mothers Alliance, but waited to join for about a year. “I was not courageous enough to join. I did not want to be identified as a mother.” Even once students join the group, they are guarded and some rarely speak. In interviews, they said they valued the opportunity to be with other students in similar positions, but they did not open up much during the club meetings. A few days after I interviewed Elizabeth, she stopped by my office to thank me for interviewing her. She said it was the first time she had told anyone her story and that it made her feel so much better. She attended the meetings regularly, and the

student leaders of the meetings often asked for volunteers to share their experiences, yet she had never done so.

Most of the student mothers leave their children with a relative. So unless they are visibly pregnant while on campus, others do not necessarily know they are mothers. They choose whether to “come out” to their peers and instructors. Sometimes this goes well—Jessica said she waited a long time to tell her friends because she was worried about their reaction, but when she told them, “I found it was normal: so many of them have babies.” Though some have supportive friends, most of them experienced at least some of their friends shunning them once they disclosed that they were mothers. Gladys summed it up this way, “Some [friends] run away, some talk very ill about you, but I still maintain some up to now.” Even two married students told the first author that they lost friends. One said her “friends didn’t want to associate” with her once she was pregnant. The other, Joyce, said, “Sometimes when you become a student mother, your friends become fewer. People look at you, ‘She stays outside [the campus]; she has a baby.’” Thus, the lack of campus housing is not only a practical hardship, but it also serves as a symbolic marker that sets student mothers apart from their peers.

As mentioned above, the university provided no resources for student mothers. In a conversation with the first author, a high-ranking administrator said that the university would never provide housing on campus for students with children, since that would be seen to encourage immorality¹¹. This stigmatization, and the profound shame that accompanies it, is all the more striking since generally, motherhood is valued in Kenya and throughout Africa (Ngunjiri 2009; Oduyoye 1995; Oyewumi 2003; Teboh 2013). The fact that even married mothers felt stigmatized within the university points to the “contradictory notions of moral authority and responsibility” shaping norms and transgressions within specific contexts (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001, 2). Gendered expectations about women’s reproductive roles intersect with lower academic expectations of women (Kiluva-Ndunda 2001) to normalize the lack of resources and support for student mothers at the university level. While we did not study student fathers, from the student mothers’ perspectives, the women bear all the shame. As we will discuss below, some student fathers are emotionally and financially supportive, but they suffer no consequences. In her interview, after discussing the need for the Student Mothers Alliance and support for student mothers in general, Nancy summed up by saying, “It’s like you’re blamed for what has happened to you.” While in this moment Nancy expresses victimhood, in other moments she and the other student mothers assert their agency and strength.

Righteousness

Abortion is illegal in Kenya, and at the time of the research, there was a moral panic regarding abortion. Local newspapers frequently reported on aborted fetuses being found in Nairobi, and editorials linked abortion, immorality, and the “West.” For example, the director of a pro-life organization called Heartbeat Kenya said, “We have seen it happen in the West and if we legalise abortion, we are doomed” (Njeri 2007). The strongest institutional opponents of abortion are the Roman Catholic and Protestant, especially evangelical, churches (Kaoma 2016; Parsitau 2012). These churches are clearly not indigenous to Kenya, yet in meetings they were described as protecting “Kenyan” morality against incursions from the “West.” All the student mothers who attended the meetings were Christian, and meetings generally began with a prayer. The

prevalence of abortion and the outcry against it gave the student mothers a moral certainty and a way to redeem themselves. While the Alliance meetings were often strained and silent, the members became impassioned and vocal when discussing the need to prevent abortion among other university students. In their interviews, several talked about being encouraged to get an abortion by friends or their boyfriends. Elizabeth became pregnant in her first semester at university. When she told her boyfriend, also a student, he suggested she get an abortion.

I couldn't face that. I said, "Regardless of the inevitable, I will go through with it." That broke us up. Even after my boyfriend ran away, I made it through, and that made me feel I want to get others out of that situation where one feels like "all is lost, I have to get rid of the baby."

Meetings sometimes included "pep talks" where guest speakers commended the student mothers for their dual roles and praised them for sacrificing themselves and enduring hardship for their children. The guest speakers were all Kenyan and were usually university affiliates, though once a lawyer came to talk about domestic violence. This reconstruction of shame into honor is similar to Johnson-Hanks' account of how women in Cameroon use "traditional" contraceptive methods to "act out a disciplined, honorable, and modern identity" shaped by formal education, Catholicism, and economic change (2002, 246). In addition to providing emotional support for the student mothers, the Alliance also provided limited financial support through an income-generating project discussed below. Grace felt that expanding this project was essential. "This would discourage abortion among college students," she said. "Abortions happen because they don't know how they will care for babies. There are so many abortions." While she was strongly opposed to abortion, she was not advocating for contraception but rather for economic support for student mothers so that this joint role of student mother, this "modern identity," would be more achievable and thus seem more feasible to other students.

Pride

Many of the student mothers expressed pride in not having abortions. For some of them, this pride extended to other aspects of their identities as students and parents. This pride depends on sustaining an ideal of gender equity and the possibility of education and independence for women. It also means rejecting the idea that student mothers do not belong in the university. Lily articulated this idea.

I need to be there for them [other student mothers]. I need to tell them they shouldn't be suffering alone. I want to show them that being a student mother doesn't mean you can't succeed and do well academically. In fact, you're better than them [students without children].

This assertion echoes Wekesa's findings in her study of Kenya primary and secondary school students who return to school as mothers: "By reinventing and invoking new identities of 'capable' student mothers, these young mothers were able to successfully put into public scrutiny these negative discourses [about schoolgirls having children]" (2011, 37).

Almost all the student mothers express a sense of achievement in providing for their babies despite financial difficulties. Some comment that having a baby in university makes sense so that they can focus on their careers once they finish. Elizabeth said, “I’m very proud of it. ... If I land a good job, I won’t have to worry about getting pregnant and all that.” While most of those who are unmarried say they would like to marry eventually, Lily wants to remain single.

I’ve made up my mind never to get serious with anyone.... What I’ve experienced with men is not the best. ... I have a stepsister who refused to get married. She stayed single and has kids. They’re happy. I love that. That’s what I would also like.

Because international development organizations emphasize educating girls and delaying marriage (Weis 2014), these goals have become identified with the West. To counter this association, Kenyan advocates of gender equity seek to reframe them as “African.” At meetings, Kenyan speakers would often say things like, “It’s not just Americans who say women should not be the servants of their husbands.” The Gender Equity Team regularly included an “African” (traditional) fashion show as part of their gender equity events, thus asserting their African-ness even as they worked for gender equity.

African feminists and womanists like Nnaemeka (1998), Aina (1998), Chukurere (1998), and Kolawole (1997) assert the plurality of feminisms in Africa and highlight a few shared features that distinguish African feminism, suggesting the movement’s indigenous roots and reframing of gender justice. Yet “new rights and opportunities for women are often seen as inconsistent with the cultural norms to which women should adhere” (Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, 6). While attending to variation in gender regimes prior to colonialism, scholars generally agree that colonialism imposed a particular patriarchal gender regime (Kiruthu, Musalia, and Jalang’o-Ndeda 2013; Mwatha 2017; Uchendu 2008).

African women’s bodies were at the center of colonial appropriation and regulation and came to represent a fraught realm of political processes, policies, laws, educational, and cultural ideologies, as well as a politicalized vessel for narratives of culture, nation, tradition, modernity, authenticity, disempowerment, and empowerment in the post-colonial era. (Falola and Amponsah 2013, 6)

Since colonial times, schools and universities have been key institutions for negotiating the “fraught realm” of embodied gender. Indeed, Provincial College—which later became Provincial University—was founded to educate white men and to support settler colonialism by training them to increase agricultural production (Ogot and Ochieng’ 1995). After independence, universities within Kenya were central sites for nation-building (Riria 2014), thus Provincial University has long been a site to contest and reshape ideas and practices from abroad and within the country.

Despite this complicated past and present, in Kenya, the popular understanding of gender equity is as “Western” interference with “Kenyan” norms. While African women and women’s movements have been leaders in promoting women’s rights globally, “‘feminism’ has often been conceived of disparagingly as a Western or foreign concept” (Tripp and Badri 2017, 5). This popular understanding is reinforced at Provincial by the fact that international development

organizations often provided funding for gender equity, or “gender sensitization,” trainings on campus. Yet, in addition to the more intimate space of the Student Mothers Alliance, the larger workshops provide an alternative “public” space where the student mothers can claim their dual identities among the broader university population. At one such workshop, the student speaker asked the student mothers in the room to stand up. Almost all the students that we knew to have children stood up, even women who told us they were generally reluctant to let others know they were student mothers. Accessing this “safe space” is not without a cost. Because the Student Mothers Alliance is sponsored by the GSI, which promotes gender equity on and off campus and hosts these workshops, some women on campus see participation as contravening gender norms. Gladys invited another student mother to attend with her. “She told me to go alone because that is where those who have been frustrated by their boyfriends go to console themselves.”

For student mothers who are married or still involved with their children’s fathers, pursuing their education may risk their relationship. Three of the 12 said their partners were threatened by their educational goals, and all three relationships ended. Nancy, one of the older students at age 29 during the time of the study, was already married with children when she came to university. Her husband did not approve of her pursuing her education: “He wanted me to be a housewife.” After he became abusive, she divorced him. Another of these three, Gladys, was kept prisoner by her boyfriend’s family for four months. During this time, her boyfriend told her that she was stupid and that she should drop out. He threw away her birth control pills and raped her, impregnating her with her second child. Gladys now gives herself pep talks to keep going to prove him wrong: “I told myself that if I am not going to work hard then I will rot, as my boyfriend had told me to go back home and rot.” On the other hand, four interviewees had supportive partners or husbands who encouraged them in their education, including one case where the man’s family was against his wife continuing her studies. Martha met her baby’s father at university where he was also a student. After she became pregnant, they decided to marry. He encouraged her to stay in school and took on some household chores while she was pregnant: “He does the cleaning, prepares a meal.”

Most of the student mothers came from families that could not give them much financial support, and their new role as mothers also changed the family dynamics. Martha said that her uncles used to give her money, but “they don’t give any more money once you have a kid—they see you as independent now.” Martha’s uncles were not angry at her for having a baby; they just now saw her in a different role. Most of the student mothers did have conflicts with their parents and other family members when they became pregnant. However, most of them said their parents were most worried and disappointed that they would drop out of university, not by the fact of the pregnancy per se, even among unmarried mothers. Lydia’s story is typical, “My mother was against me getting married before I finished my studies,” though they got on good terms once her mother saw she was staying in school. So, while the pregnancy is the biggest problem that the student mothers experience in the university setting (as described in the shame section above), in the home setting, risking the university education is the biggest problem. As Joyce said, “My parents were expecting so much from me, I didn’t want to disappoint them [by dropping out due to pregnancy].” Thus, the student mothers who persist reject the assumption that they cannot combine their identities and roles as students and as mothers.

Because student parents have more expenses, but do not get any more money from the government than other parents, a few did jobs like washing clothes or selling mandazi [doughnuts] to get by.¹² Because of the financial pressures the student mothers face, the GSI helped the club establish a hair salon as an income-generating project¹³. Because of these funds, student mothers were able to get emergency loans that were essential to many of them. While the hair salon was floundering in 2004-2005, the project was pioneering in terms of addressing the practical needs of the student mothers. In the following section we discuss how the need for income-generation has evolved into the present.

Changes since 2005

Since the primary research for this paper was conducted over a decade ago, we want to bring the paper up to the present by discussing changes and continuities since that time. Many herald technology for its potential to solve social problems. While online, evening, and flexible learning modalities can help students who are also mothers, these options are usually more expensive and are only offered in certain universities in Kenya. At the time of this study, the university was not offering such options. As of the writing of this paper (2018), Provincial University offers open- and distance-learning options; however, these options do not accommodate undergraduate student mothers as they are only available for selected post-graduate courses. Also, Spilovoy (2013) found that mothers enrolled in online courses in the U.S. experienced difficulties balancing studying and being a mother, even though they did not have to attend classes in person. The student mothers still needed the support of their spouses or families to succeed in online courses, since they do not solve all problems for student mothers.

Provincial University now provides a model childcare center within the campus. This childcare center is staffed by a college nurse and a caretaker during the official working hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. GSI began the childcare center in 2014 because student mothers were having problems finding childcare. GSI partnered with the neighborhood nursery school to offer childcare services for the student population, as well as other people who are not students but reside around the university. Although student mothers have to pay a small fee for the service, it has allowed them to free up time for studying and attending class¹⁴.

GSI has also tried to educate lecturers about the stigmatization of student mothers and the unique challenges that they face. Deans and lecturers sometimes are invited to and attend coffee hour forums hosted by the Gender Equity Team. In these forums, some student mothers communicate their sentiments on insensitive lecturers' language. The GSI director tries to use the events to promote sensitive and considerate language by lecturers who can strongly influence the learning environments for student mothers.

The Student Mothers Alliance continues with more student mothers as members (55 in 2012-13)¹⁵. Most student mothers who attend the meetings display courage and zeal in furthering their education after receiving affirmation from their lecturers and fellow students who assist them in getting class notes. Single student mothers who overcome stigma and endeavor to complete their education often display great motivation to support their young children and other student mothers. They express appreciation for the affirmation and motivation they receive from fellow

students and lecturers, and some share stories of anxiety and depression when they do not receive this support.

The hair salon mentioned above is still an income-generating project for the Student Mothers Alliance, but now it is operated by professionals who pay rent. This is used to support the club activities and provide funds on an emergency basis as needed. Currently, the Student Mothers Alliance also raises money by making pastries and other foods to sell to students. Through some feminist lenses, this can be seen as further segregation of women into highly gendered roles, but the activity is aimed at inspiring student mothers to be innovative and business-driven even as they strive to make ends meet on campus. The student mothers often derive their definition of success from balancing student life and motherhood while finding alternative and sustainable means of making money for their daily expenses. The student mothers need financial independence in the event that their partners and/or families pull away and stop supporting them.

These strategies, and others—including referring student mothers to internship and job opportunities—are practical ways of meeting the needs of student mothers. While some have support from partners and families, all can come to GSI. The student mothers need systemic support from the university, and the government, in order to promote gender equity at all levels of education. In particular, there is still no housing for student mothers on campus, nor any additional financial support for them. The 2015 Student Handbook states:

In case a student becomes pregnant, and in order to protect the health of the mother and the child, it is recommended that she vacates university halls of residence three months before delivery and can reapply for accommodation [without the baby] three months after delivery.

In 2004, the rationale for asking pregnant students to move out was that it “inhibits academic performance.” While asking pregnant students to move out for the health of mother and child may be considered an improvement—in that there is no longer a suggestion that they are less capable as students—the situation in practical terms remains the same: there is no housing for pregnant students or students who keep their babies with them.

CONCLUSION

For student mothers to continue in their pursuit for education, they require more resources as compared to students without children due to the fact that they have more pressing needs for accommodations near lecture rooms and for their children’s survival: food, clothing, and healthcare. Achieving education for student mothers creates advantages for the students themselves and the families they are bringing up. Studies show that improving parents’ educational levels begets positive short and far-reaching effects for dependents, often resulting in increased wages, heightened engagement in the education of their children, and higher probability of their children going for a higher degree in education (Miller, Gault, and Thorman 2011; Attewell and Lavin 2007).

Morley, Leach, and Lugg (2009) point to the mixed record of higher education for promoting equity along various dimensions in sub-Saharan Africa. While higher education does provide

opportunity, these opportunities most benefit men and students from more affluent families. Our research found that student mothers from poor rural families are especially vulnerable. As Weis found in her analysis of marriage age and maternal health, “without the institutions in place to provide continued education, gainful employment, and advanced health services, women will continue to be subjected to the dangers of poverty” (2014, 11). Given that most public university students in Kenya are in their early to mid-twenties, advocating the further delay of child-bearing is not going to be an effective policy solution for all of them. Currently, parenthood is stigmatized among women university students and seen as disruptive to the trajectory of academic and career success.

In addition to the practical needs of the student mothers, they also need family, peer, and institutional support for their dual roles as mothers and students. In this paper, we have analyzed their shared experiences; how they vary by class, marital status, and individual factors; and how the student mothers can move between shame and pride depending on context. While some experienced profound emotional—and even physical—abuse and all the single mothers felt stigmatized, they also expressed great pride. They were proud of not having had abortions, of being able to help their peers, and of being university students. In general, they reject the notion that they should have delayed child-bearing until after university. They shape their own identities as Kenyan mothers and students within the constraints of the university and their society, which in turn are shaped by local, national, and transnational flows of information, ideologies, and resources.

The narratives around gender equality and motherhood are culturally-bound and dynamic. The assumption that feminism is a Western import negatively affects women’s access to resources and their desire to get involved in activities at the GSI. Thus, generic “women’s empowerment” programming is unlikely to make a difference and might actually worsen the situation. However, targeted interventions could improve graduation rates and improve quality of life for university students who are mothers. The implications of these findings for the broader issue of gender and higher education, and for gender and development more generally, are that we need to examine how the embodied, material, and symbolic aspects of gender intersect in particular contexts. Identities and relationships are situated within narratives and institutions that provide constraints, but also resources for negotiation. Achieving gender parity in higher education—or other similar overarching goals—will rely on both fine-grained analysis and policies that acknowledge and build on fruitful tensions.

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise attributed, all quotes are from transcripts of recorded interviews. All names of people and institutions are pseudonyms.

² The GSI operating expenses come from the university though support for the student mothers is not explicitly part of their charter; GSI added those programs without receiving any additional financial support. In addition to the baseline support from the university, the GSI occasionally received financial or in-kind support from international, foreign, or domestic sources for specific programs or activities, but none of these were targeted towards the student mothers. For example, UNIFEM supported the development of academic courses at the institute; the Danish government agency DANIDA donated books and computers; and the Kenyan Ministry of Agriculture contracted with GSI to provide several trainings for its employees.

³ When classes are cancelled, make-ups are scheduled whenever the instructor and a room are available. Classes are cancelled fairly often due to strikes or more minor reasons (such as double-booking a room). Attending class in person is very important since there may not be a textbook to refer to.

⁴ Towards the end of the paper we will discuss how this language has changed.

⁵ In her role as director of the GSI, the second author was in frequent communication with faculty and staff of the other Kenyan universities and thus aware of the situation for student mothers at the other institutions as well.

⁶ At Provincial University, there were approximately 3,000 full-time boarding students (MOEST 2004). Many more students did a combination of distance learning and short-term intensive in-person classes.

⁷ During 2004-2005, the first author was not affiliated with any US university, thus the study was not covered under a U.S. Institutional Review Board (IRB). During this time period, there was no IRB at Egerton University. For the interviews and participant observation in 2004-2005, we relied on the principles of ethical research and carried out the project to pose minimal risk to the participants. The first author obtained verbal informed consent from the interviewees, including informing them that they were free to stop the interview or skip any questions without consequence. None of the interviewees were students of the first author, who transcribed the interviews, assigned pseudonyms, and then destroyed the key.

⁸ Students usually begin university at age 20 or older.

⁹ Masters and doctoral students, who are referred to as postgraduate students in Kenya.

¹⁰ The GSI generally referred students in psychological distress to the Dean of Students office, where there were trained counselors, including some with training in gender issues. In addition, there was one university counselor based at the GSI who specialized in trauma and gender-based violence. There was also one university security officer based at the GSI who was trained at the GSI. Students could report rape or other gender-based violence to her.

¹¹ While providing housing to married students with children could not be seen as promoting immorality, that was not provided either. The administrator did not mention this possibility.

¹² Generally, university students in Kenya do not have part-time jobs.

¹³ While the hair salon could have also served as an opportunity to learn business skills, during the early period of the study entrepreneurship was not valued among the university students. Their goal was to obtain a secure government, corporate, or non-governmental organization job.

¹⁴ Data on student mothers' experiences and educational outcomes is still lacking. Future research should include 1) a survey of all students, supplemented by interviews with a sample of

students, in order to find out rates of parenthood, attitudes towards student parents, and experiences of student parents and 2) additional research specifically with student mothers and fathers to understand the effects of the day care center and any other interventions that are implemented.

¹⁵ Further research is needed to determine if there are more student mothers at the university overall or whether now a greater proportion become members of the Student Mothers Alliance.

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