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Challenges and Support of Female Students in Ghanaian Public Universities

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Abstract

The study was conducted to identify the challenges and support of 403 ladies in their daily lives as family members and students in five public Universities in Ghana. Challenges of the students were found to be: family relationship; the learning process; family care; financial constraint; and gynecological problems. Support needs of the students were: family life support; alternatives for missed lecture periods; funding; study facilities; and academic guidance. Their main sources of support for family and school work were their family members, hired domestic workers and class mates, while their expected sources of support were family members, classmates, the universities and the government. It is recommended that the universities should make their learning environments female learner friendly by considering the needs of female students in infrastructural and curriculum development, and also facilitate the transformation of cultural norms that make it difficult for women to achieve their educational goals, through university-community link.

Keywords: Challenges, needs, support

Introduction

University education prepares students to become high caliber professionals who will take charge of policies and administrative management of a nation to facilitate national development. A World Bank report (2011) has indicated that no country has developed without a core of highly educated people and the larger the gender gap in university education the poorer a country. However, 125 million children throughout the world do not receive any kind of education and two-thirds of these are girls. Similarly, two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults are women (Oxfam, 2001).

Female education makes it possible to tap the potentials of women to support nation building. Female education also provides women with greater earning power and promotes smaller, healthier and better

educated families which can deal effectively with the challenges of the 21st century (Ityavyar, 2005). The international society therefore agrees that something must be done to close the gender gap in higher education because the gap gets bigger between males and females at the higher levels, with female students being on the lower side in terms of numbers.

Colleges and universities provide women with academic qualification to enhance their competitiveness on the labor market. Consequently, where women are unable to pursue university education, it is impossible for them to secure high level job positions. Widalf (2011) has argued that the widespread low level of education among women is one important factor for discriminating against females at the household and community levels. According to Widalf, the ratio of female to male

membership in both Parliament and District Assemblies, public and private sectors and in corporate organizations do not reflect Ghana's population with 51% women. There are several discriminatory practices which affect women's intellectual development and which are often cast in the teeth of culture (Mannan, 2007). If every family member, regardless of sex is encouraged and enabled to develop his/her intellectual abilities, it will make the citizenry effective contributors to national development. The interconnections between education, the family and social spheres of life highlight the need to understand experiences in the life of the female student. There have been several interventions such as affirmative action in the Ghanaian public universities to lower the aggregate for admission of women, but still few women graduate from the universities. Consequently, all the public universities in Ghana have adopted affirmative action programs to increase the enrollment of female students (Kwapong, 2007), but society may have to do more for female students to achieve their educational goals. Strategizing to adequately meet the needs of female students in their daily family-school interactions would make the academic environment friendlier, increase retention and completion of their academic programs and ultimately, increase the number of females in top job positions. This study focuses on emerging challenges in the lives of female students as family members

and students, and the support they need to facilitate their intellectual development.

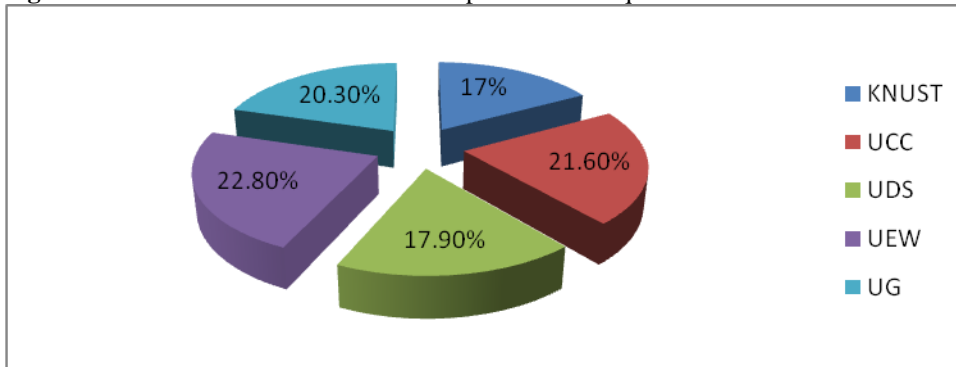
Methods

A survey was conducted on a sample of 403 female students offering different programs in five public universities in Ghana, namely, University of Ghana (UG); University of Education, Winneba (UEW); University of Cape Coast (UCC); University for Development Studies (UDS); and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). Purposive sampling technique was used to select female halls in the universities, while random sampling technique was used to select one hundred female students from each of the selected halls, using their hall registers. The main instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire, structured to have both open and close ended questions. Items in the questionnaire covered age and marital status, reasons for pursuing higher education, challenges as a result of their family-school interactions, support needs, sources and expectations. Out of the 500 respondents listed to participate in the study, 403 (86.6%) responded to the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

Outcomes of the study were focused on concerns expressed by the female university students about their daily lives.

Figure-1: Distribution of students who responded to the questionnaire and their universities



The students' responses to the questionnaires were 22.8% from UEW; 21.6% from UCC; 20.3% from UG; 17.9% from UDS; 17.4% from KNUST.

Table-1: Maturity and marital status of the female students

Variable	Freq.	%
Marital status/Age		
Mature students (≥ 25 yrs.)	159	39.5
Non-mature students (< 25 yrs.)	244	60.5
TOTAL	403	100.0
Married	83	20.6
Single	320	79.4
TOTAL	403	100.0

The students were aged between 19 and 50 years. Students who were mature (≥ 25 years) formed 39.5%, while the non-mature students (< 25 years) formed 60.5%. Younger (non-mature) women were therefore more than older (mature) women in the five universities. Married female students formed

20.6%, while single female students were 79.4%. Only one of the non-mature female students was married. Majority of the respondents were therefore young and unmarried and expected not to have family commitments that would disturb their studies in the university.

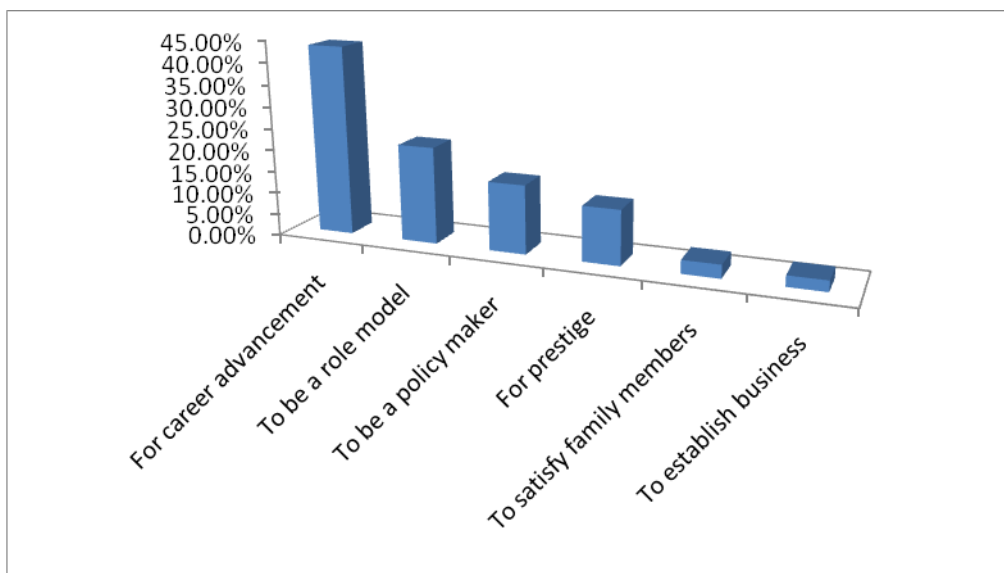


Figure-2: Students' reasons for pursuing higher education

The greatest motivating factor for university education in this study was for career advancement (43.7%); followed by desire to be a role model (22.3%); desire to be a policy maker (15.8%); and study to satisfy family members (3.1%). The desire to establish business (2.5%) was the least motivating factor. Enhanced capabilities through higher education will lead to increased productivity, higher job prospects,

career advancement and eventually higher income as observed by Hodges and Baah (2006). Generally, the ladies surveyed had tangible reasons for pursuing university education. If enabled to operate to the optimum, Ghana would get women who could perform remarkably in various sectors of the economy and serve as role models to girls. There would also be more highly educated women with higher incomes to

support themselves and their families, and provide better guidance to children to reduce the social crime rate of the youth in Ghana. Participating in policy making and especially, to formulate policies of relevance to the welfare of all family members was not high (15.8%) on the agenda of the students studied. However, once they get into high job positions, their chances of participating in policy formulation will also be high.

Challenges of the respondents

The main challenges identified from the respondents were contextual issues relating to female students’ interactions with their families during school sessions. Normally, one would expect the respondents to be full-time students without any family distractions to enable them to operate on the same platform with their colleagues, but this was not the case

Table 2: Categories of challenges of the students

Challenges %	*Freq.	
1. Family Relationship	215	28.4
Tension between partners	45	5.9
Strained relationship with care givers	36	4.8
Inability to fulfill marital obligations	30	4.0
Uncompromising in-laws	26	3.4
Suspicion of infidelity	26	3.4
Sibling rivalry	25	3.3
Parents’ marriage under threat	15	2.0
Guilt for not being able to perform family roles well	12	1.6
2. Learning	196	25.9
Fatigue	87	11.5
Poor concentration on academic work	72	9.5
Inability to understand concepts taught	37	4.9
3. Family Care	180	23.8
Complaints about child behavior	64	8.5
Pressure to leave school and care for the family	40	5.3
Poor domestic care	39	5.2
Poor childcare	37	4.9
4. Financial	132	17.4
Inability to access sponsorship	88	11.6
High cost of study materials	24	3.2
Bread-winning	20	2.6
5. Gynecological	34	4.5
Chronic menstrual pains	20	2.6
Pregnancy related problems	9	1.2
Post-partum problems	5	0.7
Total	757	100

*There were multiple responses, hence the total is more than 403.

Family relationship challenges in the female students' academic pursuit topped the list with 28.4%, followed by the learning process (25.9 %) and family-care challenges (23.8%). Financial challenges recorded 17.4%, with gynecological problems posing the least challenge (4.5%). If these obstacles which emerged mostly as a result of the students' abilities and inabilities to meet their culturally assigned family roles were removed, academic work would be less stressful for the students. In a similar study, Steele, et al. (2005) found childcare, relationship and financial difficulties to be distracters of academic excellence. This study has revealed learning process in the university, gynecological and other aspects of family-care challenges not recorded by Steele et al. (2005). The sum of problems of family relationship (28.4%) and family care (23.8%) challenges was higher than the sum of learning (25.9%) and financial problems (17.4%).

Family Relationship

Detailed family relationship challenges encountered by female students were tension between partners; strained relationships with care givers; inability to fulfill marital obligations; uncompromising in-laws; suspicion of infidelity; sibling rivalry; parents' marriage under threat; and guilt for not being able to perform family roles well. Students in this category explained that they were not able to meet the demands made by their family members, especially their husbands, because of lack of time, and this generated frequent quarrels between them and their partners. Jealous husbands who were suspicious of their wives also posed problems. Some married students stated that they were often embarrassed by their husbands who were afraid that in male dominated environments their wives would be tempted to live promiscuous lives. Some parents' marriages were also under threat of divorce. While one parent supported them to have university education, the other parent disagreed and this created tension between the parents. Other reasons were that their siblings were of the view that they were wasting their family resources. Guilt feelings for not fulfilling traditional role

expectations at home were a problem for some of the students in this study. Some female students complained that they were not able to provide their husbands and children with the love and affection they required. Others felt guilty that their parents were spending too much money on them and indicated that they would not have pursued university education if they had known about expenditure patterns on their campuses. According to the female students, the behavior of their family members and support givers often resulted in misunderstanding between them, and this trend made it difficult for them to concentrate on their studies. Educational researchers and psychologists have shown that successful learners are those active students who take charge of their learning (Assadi and Mozafari, 2012). Zamir et al. (2012) have also stated that women utilize support from others to cope with stress, while men do not. Hence, if they are given the needed support, learning will be less stressful for the female students. Though family members and hired domestic workers tried to assist the students, Pederson and Ivey (1994) asserted that behavior patterns differ from person to person and between groups. Hence an outsider breaking through the student's family boundary to assist would not behave the same way as one in the house. Pederson and Ivey (1994) made it clear that the person who is coming in to assist has her own personal behavior patterns acquired over the years which cannot be suppressed or changed overnight without hurting. Relationship problems were therefore bound to occur and the affected students had to face and manage them well. The self enhancement of female students need not be a cause for poor family relations, but it appears that is the situation in the current study.

Learning

Challenges which affected learning directly comprised of fatigue; poor concentration on academic work; and inability to understand concepts taught. Female students, who experienced fatigue, found combining family and academic work very stressful. Four students in this category had babies

while in school, and they depended on class mate support for academic work because, instructional time was not flexible and they did not have equipment to record class notes to enable them to go over missed lectures. Female students who stated that they could not concentrate on their academic work explained that they got disturbed by unpleasant reports about their children's behaviors and other bad news from their family members and hired domestic workers. Two students who found it difficult to combine marital responsibilities, family and academic work indeed wanted to leave school to take good care of their children and families.

Rapoport and Rapoport (1969) observed that fatigue was common with career women and increased tension between husband and wife, especially if no domestic help or adequate childcare facilities had been arranged. Incidence of Fatigue which is a generally known cause of physical and mental health problems was up to 11.5% among the female students. Many of the students who missed lectures indicated it was due to ill-health. A student who is tired or ill cannot do any serious learning and score high grade. Some students subsumed their personal development to ensure the proper functioning of their families. However, their personal development would rather enable them to make informed choices for enhanced family life in modern times.

Family Care

Challenges raised by students in this category were complaints about their children's behaviors; pressure to leave school to care for the family; poor domestic care; and poor childcare. Students who indicated that their children were not well cared for stated that the children were often left on their own without supervision or left with inexperienced and unreliable domestic workers, who had to combine childcare and domestic chores. Some of the students indicated that their husbands were finding it difficult to cope with childcare and domestic chores. Some in-laws were also not happy to see their sons performing domestic roles when the wives' domestic services had been

paid for during their marriage ceremonies. As a result, some husbands and in-laws wanted them to withdraw from school to take care of the family. Herz (2005) stated that obstacles to academic performance of female students included cultural barriers. Cultural roles of students were indeed obstacles to their academic pursuits. Probably, if family members got to understand that university education was a channel for both personal and family life improvement they would all pool resources to take good care of the family to enable the students to concentrate on their studies.

Financial Challenge

Female students in this category complained of high cost of study materials; inability to access sponsorship; and bread-winning. These students explained that they were not on scholarship or study leave with monthly salary and their family members were too poor to support them. Twenty (2.6%) of the female students who were on study leave with monthly salary still complained of financial constraints because they were bread-winners. This additional financial responsibility made it difficult for them to meet their personal financial needs. Some students stated that though their parents could afford the cost of their educational needs, they refused to support them because they were ignorant about current cost of education in public universities. Two point seven percent (2.7%) of the students cut lectures because they did not have money for course materials and equipment. These students added that their circumstances made it necessary for them to use school time on income generation activities. Students who had to work (trade or teach part time) to earn some income to satisfy family issues, breadwinners, and those whose parents were either poor or unwilling to give them the money they needed to make life on campus less stressful were frustrated and distressed. With these challenges, it would not be surprising to learn that female students who could not access sponsorship would engage in sex trade for money and for grades they have not worked for. This is because employers prefer higher academic achievers, but to get a high division

certificate in the university, one's grade scores have to be high.

Gynecological problems

Many of the students who stated that they missed lectures often indicated that they did so because of ill-health, and specifically, chronic menstrual pains, pregnancy related and post-partum problems. Though only 4.5% of the respondents complained of gynecological problems, such problems occur frequently in the lives of women in their reproductive years. Hence, the students who did not complain of gynecological problems may experience them some other time and also miss some lectures because lecture periods are fixed and not flexible. Kelly and Slaughter (1991) and Martin (1998) observed that institutional systems, having been created largely by men, hence practices and norms reflect masculine experiences, values and life situations to favor men, and therefore whatever is normal in the system tends to ignore women's problems. Women's biological make-up, rights and responsibilities differ from those of men and it therefore follows that their needs and priorities are also different. Consequently, female students adjust to

academic environments which do not consider their special biological characteristics and cultural demands in designing curricula which are not stressful for women to enable them to achieve their academic goals in the university.

As stated by Odur (2004), understanding women's experiences will help to plan interventions to minimize their problems and increase their retention. The observations of Kelly and Slaughter (1991) and Martin (1998) that institutional systems favor men and ignore women's problems, may not totally be true because there is affirmative action for gender equity in the universities. The concerns expressed by female students in this study however show that there is more to be done to enable them to have stress-free life on their university campuses. Quality academic development of female students cannot be expected to be the best if they have to study under stress and have less time than their male colleagues to go through the same programs. Hence, Gitau (2004) and Opare (2004) have advised that challenges of female students must be strategically managed to enable them to achieve their educational goals.

Support needs, sources and expectations of female students

Table-3: Support needs of the students

Support needs	Freq.*	%
1. Family Life Support	351	35.6
Domestic assistance	140	14.2
Childcare	106	10.8
Kitchenettes in the halls	76	7.7
Improved on-campus health facilities for female students and their children	29	2.9
2. Alternatives for Missed Lecture Periods	181	18.4
Study support	84	8.5
Flexible lecture periods	56	5.7
Soft copies of lecture notes	41	4.2
3. Funding	170	17.3
Scholarship	132	13.4
Study leave with monthly salary	38	3.9
4. Study Facilities	160	16.2
Improved internet facilities	97	9.8
Improved laboratory facilities	63	6.4
5. Academic Guidance	124	12.5
Mentorship by female lecturers	105	10.6
Counseling	19	1.9
TOTAL	986	100

*There were multiple responses, hence the total is more than 403.

The expressed needs of students for support are listed in Table 4. The need for family life support (35.6%) is almost twice the need for alternatives for missed lecture periods (18.4%). There are also need for funding (17.3%); study facilities (16.2%); and academic guidance (12.5%).

Family life support

Family life support was expressed by the highest percentage of 35.6 students. Obviously support in this area would enable these students to have more time for their studies and achieve their intellectual aspirations without much stress. Concerns raised by the female students in this group were; domestic assistance (14.2%), childcare (10.8%), kitchenettes in the halls (7.7%), and improved on-campus health facilities for female students and their children (2.9%). Though family members and hired domestic workers were assisting with family activities, it appears their efforts did not meet the female students' expectations.

The high percentage of female students who indicated that they needed family support in this study shows that irrespective of their maturity and marital status, female students need the support which is almost twice the need for alternatives for missed lecture periods. It is however not clear the type of improved on-campus health facilities they were requesting for because all the universities have health facilities which the students and their families can access. The issue of lack of kitchenettes in the halls also affects both male and female students, hence it may not be considered as a stress factor for female students alone.

Alternatives for missed lecture periods

Alternatives for missed lecture periods were the concerns of 18.4 % of the students. These students mentioned study support (8.5%), flexible lecture periods (5.7%) where students can join any sub-group of their year group for lectures, in case they are not able to join their original groups. Soft copies of lecture note (4.2%) to facilitate independent studies. Bellow and King (1993) suggested improved educational facilities, alternative teaching periods and

supportive network of peers to accommodate female students' dual roles and constraints. Though Bellow and King (Ibid.) suggestion for supportive network of peers was not mentioned by the students in this study, class mates' support for academic work was mentioned by four students who had babies while in school. The affected students stated that their class mates helped them to do their assignments.

Funding

Funding was found to be a support need for 17.3% of the students. Students who needed scholarship were 13.4%, while those who needed study leave with monthly salary were 3.9%. Chambas (1998) indicated that university education can no longer be totally free and proposed cost sharing and students' loan trust for university students. All the students collected the students' loan but still indicated that they needed more money. Normally, students with outstanding academic records gain scholarship. Unfortunately, female students in this study generally spent lesser time on academic work due to their family roles, and so were not likely to earn the grade scores that could qualify them for scholarship.

Study facilities

The need for study facilities were stated by 16.2% of the respondents. Improved internet facilities (9.8%) and improved laboratory facilities (6.4%) were the specific needs expressed by the female students in this case. The students wanted to be able to access the internet wherever they were, and at any time on campus. They stated that the high cost of their education would decrease if the laboratories were well equipped, because they would not have to buy any tools and materials. Equipping the laboratories adequately will facilitate learning. However, for some of the programs in the universities, students still have to acquire their own tools and materials to be able to practice what they learn in school after class and during vacation when the laboratories are not accessible.

Academic guidance

Academic guidance as a support need attracted 12.5% of the responses. Mentorship by female lecturers (10.6%) and counseling (1.9%) were the needs expressed by the female students in this group. To these students, their female lecturers were their sources of inspiration because they had gone through the university system. Bellow & King (1993) have also indicated the need to increase the enrolment of female staff to serve as role models in the universities.

Impressions gathered in the present study is that universities are interested in affirmative action to get more women enrolled, but their sustenance, accomplishments and attainments are not the priorities of the universities. Odur (2004) has indicated the need to go beyond the number of female students accessing higher education to emphasize on quality education in order to transform society. Female students mostly fell on their immediate family members and domestic workers for family care; on their class mates, monthly salaries, student loan and in 15.9% cases on scholarship for study support. Apart from providing domestic work assistance, their families provided money, study materials and moral support. To the students therefore, the family was their main source of support for their education. Tadaro (1985) found family environment to be important support for progress in education. Comments in Tables 2 & 3 indeed indicate that family support is substantial.

Support Expectations of the Students

Herz (2005) and Attafuah (1999) have observed that family members and the nation benefit greatly from contributions of educated women. The female students in this study expected the government and their universities to provide more support to make learning less stressful for them. The support expectations from the university were: provision of affordable on-campus childcare facilities, improved health facilities; improved internet facilities; inspiration from female lecturers as mentors; improved laboratory facilities; childcare support; counseling; study support from lecturers and

their class mates; and soft copies of lecture notes from lecturers to enable students who miss some lectures have the chance to study on their own.

Alternative lecture periods may be difficult to fix on the university lecture time table, especially where course credit is high, infrastructural facilities are limited and lecturers are few. It will also be too much to give soft copies of lecture notes to them because the students may even stop attending lectures, but contact with their lecturers is very important in the learning process. It should however be possible to have tutorials to give students who missed their regular lectures another opportunity. Child support was also expressed as a need by some of the students, who specifically suggested the establishment of affordable early childhood centers and crèches on university campuses. The universities have pre-school facilities for children, which students can access but not at subsidized costs. There are however no crèches on the university campuses to help student mothers with babies and toddlers, who rather require a lot of attention.

In a study in Europe, female university students' expectations were found to include study tutorials; mentorship; counseling; and running of course related seminars (Kirkup and Prummer, 1997). Study tutorials, counseling and course related seminars are programs that are available in Ghanaian public universities but the students still included them on their support needs list. Again, all the universities have health and internet facilities, but the students still mentioned them as their needs. This suggests that some students had different expectations for the available facilities or moved about the campuses ignorant of the facilities available to them.

Support needs such as study leave with monthly salary, scholarship and bursaries were expected from their employers and the government. The students added that if the government cannot totally sponsor university education, the institutions should be equipped adequately with facilities that will make learning less expensive and

stressful for female students on the various campuses. It is possible that some of these students could not attract sponsorship because they could not make good grades. A female student may be needy but not be able to make high grades due to these special biological and cultural challenges which act as barriers to her academic progress. Using high grade scores as a main factor to screen candidates for the award of scholarships and bursaries may therefore not favor many female students in the university.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study has shed light on some concerns about female students pursuing university education for personal development and to eventually improve family life and facilitate national development. The students however faced challenges which made life stressful and difficult to attain their aspirations. These challenges which acted as barriers to their academic achievements emerged as a result of a multitude of their culturally assigned family roles and the distinct biological characteristics of the female students. Though cultural and biological factors may be difficult to change, other factors may be modified to enable female students achieve their academic aspirations. The family, the university and the government have parts to play to support female students in their academic pursuits.

Opportunities that could be exploited to support the students to achieve their academic aspirations and maintain quality family lives were found to be numerous. Some family members were very supportive. Hence, with little public sensitization on support needs of female students and the economic returns of female university education, family members should be able to provide their best assistance to their female members. It may be necessary for the universities to facilitate the transformation of unhelpful cultural norms and institutional structures, and make them female friendly to conform to realities of the times, through formal and non-formal education.

The students' suggestion that female lecturers who have gone through what they were facing should mentor them is welcome. As role models, those female lecturers could provide the students with the hope that their experiences are not unique to them, and economic returns are great for those who persevere. Such pep talks will hopefully encourage them to reduce emotional stress. The universities can increase the numbers of female lecturers and administrators and involve them in designing policies and academic activities to address the special needs of the female students, and make learning less stressful for them in the university.

The main issue in this study is about the welfare of the female university students. Consequently, past and present female executives of Student Representative Council and Gender Desk/Women's Caucus in the various universities should be able to net-work and organize periodic conferences and workshops on issues which border on the welfare of the students and put up strong advocacy for policies that promote female education.

Manuals on strategic family life management for female students in universities could be developed in the various universities, to inform students about alternative solutions to family challenges that create barriers to their academic progress. The universities could in addition run a general course and seminars on effective family life management to update both male and female students' knowledge and skills on gender issues and technological innovations that save labor and support domestic work in the family. Including male students in such programs will help them to make informed decisions about their life-long cultural habits that create barrier to the development of the female gender.

Since some of the students in this study had babies and young children who needed attention, crèches and childcare centers in the universities will be very helpful. There is also the need for updating knowledge of

care-giving family members and domestic workers, to meet the expectations of female students who are away from home. The knowledge update will enable them to modify their outdated practices in domestic chore performance, childcare and nurturing, and also use domestic technological innovations and available community resources to manage family life with much ease. Finally, there is the need for the universities to develop community extension programs to facilitate the transformation of cultural norms that create barriers to the intellectual development of women. Such steps will ultimately lead to better family-school interactions that promote quality female education in the universities.

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