

Motherhood in Institutions of Higher Learning: The Case of Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

In many African societies and in the Old Testament in particular, motherhood is a blessing and a societal educational institution. While Eve is the mother of all the living, Kings shall come from Sarah (Gen. 3:20 & 17:16). By analogy, motherhood in the African traditional society was a sacred faculty of education. Unfortunately, in contemporary African it has become a life altering experience for many young 'girls' in institutions of higher learning. Unlike Sarah who gave birth in her old age as in Genesis 17:15-16; many girls in Kenya are giving birth before the age of eighteen. There has been emphasis on supporting 'girls' to attain university degrees. However, not much attention has been given to the socio-economic, psychological and gendered stereotypes that young girls go through while trying to balance between the classroom and motherhood in Kenyan Universities. Thus, this paper will use an ethnographic approach through an afro-feminist lens to propose that there is need to 1, have baby care centers in institutions of higher learning, 2 integrate secondary motherhood and parenthood tutorials in educational programs of higher learning, 3, and include financial support for young mothers in university budgets.

Keywords: Motherhood, Classroom, Educational Institutions, Sacred, Ethnographic Approach, Afro-Feminist Lens

Introduction

According to the research conducted by Elimu Yetu Coalition (2005, pp. 106-107), “Kenya’s education policy does not discriminate against girls and women.” This is a positive initiative in the efforts to address gender disparities in the leadership of institutions of higher learning, women empowerment and strategies to foster community development, socio- economic growth and poverty eradication. Even so, Choti (2021, p. 81) points out, that gender-related issues continue to create a gap in the attainment of education between Kenyan boys and girls. Notably, since the 2003 introduction of free primary education and day secondary education in 2008, the enrollment and retention rates of both girls and boys has increased significantly (Choti, 2021, pp. 81-81). The Kenyan government is keen on ensuring that both girls and boys enroll in primary and secondary schools and that the number is retained till all finish high school attain university entry qualification and enrollment into tertiary institutions (see Mitullah, V. M. 2020, p. 171, Choti 2021, pp 81-83 & kiluva-ndunda, M. M. 2001, pp. 9-15). However, not much is being done to address the challenges that young mothers go through as they try to balance between motherhood and the classroom in institutions of higher learning in general and in Kenyan universities in particular.

“Data from Kenya Data and Health Survey (2014) show that 1 in every 5 girls between 15-19 years is either pregnant or already a mother.” Yet, much attention is focused on community sensitization to end teenage pregnancies. Notably, contemporary African teens are going through a difficult time trying to discover their sexuality in an African context where steering conversations on matters sex is taboo (Muturi, 2021). Sadly, the motivation against teen motherhood is it’s negativity on socio-economic growth of the country and the shame a girl brings to the family when ‘she gets herself pregnant’ when young girls who already have children in institutions of higher learning have been ignored (Chigona, & Chetty, 2008). If something is said about them, it is through press briefings, gender based campaigns, or social media platforms by comedians. One therefore asks: is motherhood a ‘curse?’ While COVID-19 exacerbated the challenges of young mothers in institutions of higher learning, it further laid bare the very challenges to the world. Some girls have already gone through a lot even missing tutorials for lack of sanitary towels and juggling between home chores with class work (Osulah, 2012, pp. 3-4). Sadly, the society has turned a blind eye on older men who target vulnerable girls, impregnate and abandoned them while lamenting the high rate of teenage pregnancies (Lukoye, 2021).

In the African Traditional Society, mothers played a key role in instilling values in their children. Motherhood stood out as an educational institution that mentored and groomed children into mature responsible adults. Speaking about Ubuntu as an African educational paradigm, Abdul Karim Bangura (2005, p. 21) notes, “Mothers, were the most important teachers who would use diverse methods of teaching including songs, poems and behavior to teach their children.” In Kenyan Universities, many young mothers have no skills of motherhood. However, most of them have successfully balanced their triple roles and responsibilities as daughters, mothers and students by repositioning themselves as student-mothers and reclaiming their right to education (see Auma Okwany 2016, p. 21. Juntao Zhao (2015, p. 825) generally observes that The Old Testament shows that “the ancient Jewish people attached great importance to education and that in their classic Old Testament, there are many important educational thoughts which have an important inspiration for future generations.” In the educational system of the Old Testament like in many African societies, mothers played a very important role in teaching and mentoring the children. According to Hoyce Lyimo-Mbowe (2015, p. 31) “the teachings of a mother was supposed to be followed

obediently as indicated in proverbs 30:17.” While the Old Testament does not directly speak about young mothers, it is possible to see that young girls were victims of rape in the Old Testament as indicated in Genesis 19; 34, Numbers 31, Deuteronomy 21, and 2 Samuel 13.

In Genesis 17:16 Sarah was ninety years when she had her first-born child. The blessings that came with the promise of making Sarah the “mother of nations” carried with it the responsibility of imparting knowledge to her son. In Proverbs 1:8, a child is to listen to a father’s instruction and implored not to forsake a mother’s teaching. Arguably, a mother’s teaching was a lifelong educational package for posterity (see Katharine J. Dell 2009, p. 229). In the traditional African society, mothers were custodians of African traditional religion, culture and the system of education (Sanmartin, 2014). As early as conception, mothers took their children through a process of developing desirable habits, skills and attitudes that nurtured them into responsible individuals in family, community and the society. Fathers on the other hand were supposed to be the ‘real’ heads of the family and therefore were to provide material support for the family (see Sangeetha Madhavan, Nicholas W. Townsend & Anita I. Garey 2008, pp. 647-649). Unfortunately, their age mates who are unable to provide, older men on other hand who are on a sexual adventure, impregnate many young girls while others are victims of rape (see Clifford Odimegwu & Sibusiso Mkwanzani 2016, pp. 94-97). Thus, combining motherhood with classroom demands of tutorials, assignments and sit-in exams is taking a toll on young mothers and denying them the opportunity to mentor and pass on values of motherhood to their children. This arguably makes it difficult for one to see motherhood as a blessing.

An Ethnographic Approach Through an Afro-Feminist Lens to Motherhood

An ethnographic approach is a qualitative methodology in research that is significant in secondary data collection and analysis. David E. McNabb (2004, p. 272) points out that an ethnographic approach is a valuable tool for gathering information about behaviors embedded in and specific to cultures and subcultures. Of relevance to the concept of motherhood in Kenyan universities is the aspect of delving into the cultural ideologies informing the stereotypes and negative attitudes towards motherhood in institutions of higher learning since “young women giving birth to children or teen mothers are often on the fringes of society” (Edwina Pio & Maxine Graham 2018, p. 510). The social scientist John Brewer (2000, p. 6) defines an Ethnography approach as “the principle research methods in the social sciences that studies people in naturally occurring settings to capture the social meaning and ordinary activities.” According to Frederick Erickson (2010, p. 320) “the word ethnography was invented in the late nineteenth century as a new term based on the combination of two Greek words - ἔθνος *éthnos* ‘folk, people, nation’ and γράφω *gráphō* ‘I write.’” Of relevance to this scholarly discussion is the fact that an ethnographic approach uses anthropological techniques that focus on human behavior. It is important to note, “Many social scientists believe that human behavior is significantly influenced by the settings in which it occurs” (Stephen Wilson 1997, p. 247). In a research on Ethnography in Higher Education, Clemens Wieser and Angela Pilch Ortega (2020, p. 2) underscore the significance of ethnographic approach to research in institutions of higher learning.

Wieser and Ortega (2020, pp. 2-4) argue that “the unique qualities and principles of ethnographic research are fruitful for research in higher education which can be characterized by its entangled arrangements of different spaces- spaces of learning and teaching, spaces of research, networking spaces and spaces of higher education policy.” In ethnographic approach, context is very important. Thus, the context in which young mothers are raising their children in Kenyan universities informs the analysis while the question of

what motivates young mothers to balance between motherhood and the classroom in Kenyan universities guides the discussion. An afro-feminist lens on the other hand brings in the aspect of the experiences of young mothers in Kenyan Universities. An afro-feminist lens enables the narration of the experiences of motherhood in Kenyan universities and a reconstruction of the concept of motherhood for the dignity of young mothers in Kenya universities. Like any other liberation theological discourse, an afro-feminist lens evaluates how the experiences of young mothers in Kenyan universities have the potential to influence the concept of motherhood in the contemporary Kenyan society.

Thus, a blend of ethnography as an approach with an afro-feminist lens forms an Ethno-feminist thought, which is an “attempts to use ethnography as a means of tracing shifts in the conceptualization of gender in the anthropological literature” (see Kamala Visweswaran 1997, p. 592). An ethno-feminist thought therefore draws on the deep love for the liberating discourses of feminism that enables African women to take on the liberating discourses of eradicating injustices of cultures that still refuse to dignify women. Within the concept of motherhood, an ethno-feminist thought seeks to elevate motherhood as a blessing even in institutions of higher learning and not a persistent source of frustration and anguish as well as a lifelong distraction from education. An ethno-feminist thought builds on other African women discourses that are committed to the emancipation of women holistically. Loreen Maseno (2021, p. 1) speaks about the importance of African women scholars “examining African culture and demonstrating an understanding of women as a distinct group with inherent varieties [and values] within this category. An ethno-feminist thought therefore places the realities and experiences of young mothers in universities at the center of its liberation discourse. The ideology of motherhood is therefore underscored, as the liberation of women and girls at the same category as the liberation of women’s bodies from all forms of oppression (see Dorcas Chebet Juma 2023, pp. 1-4). Young mothers are pursuing education in Kenyan universities in order to better their lives just like fellow male students. This way it will be possible to bridge the gender inequality gap. Thus, there is need to front the course for the treatment of young mothers in Kenyan Universities with respect and dignity, by giving them equal opportunities to fully, equally and meaningfully participate in all academic programs that can empower them to be equipped to make decisions that have a direct bearing on their lives.

The Concept of Motherhood in the African Society

Remi Akujobi (2011, p. 2) defines motherhood as “an automatic set of feelings and behaviours that is switched on by pregnancy and the birth of a baby.” Akujobi (2011) draws the definition of motherhood in the African society from Mbiti’s (1970s’) recognition of the concept of a mother as central to African philosophy and spirituality. According to Akujobi (2011, p. 2), “in pregnancy, the woman is said to “glow and shine” and she receives special treatment especially from her husband and her mother-in-law.” For Akujobi (2011, pp. 2-5) the fact that some religious imagery sentimentalizes and idealizes motherhood shows that religions all over the world whether Christian, Judaic, Hindu and Islam accord very important place to motherhood. Akujobi (2011, pp. 2-5) further observes, that “with motherhood, a woman is considered blessed, she acquires a higher status in society, she is respected and mythologized.” Unfortunately, defining motherhood in the contemporary African society from the perspective of the experiences of young mothers in Kenyan Universities is complex. A student who is a mother in an institution of higher learning is caught between the expectation of culture, religious sacred texts of an ‘ideal’ mother as in proverbs 31:10-31 and the realities of her daily life in a patriarchal society in which men

dominate over the sexuality of a woman (Oduyoye, 1995, p. 199). Some scholars have differentiated motherhood from mothering in order to argue, that motherhood is a process of locating a woman's identity in her capacity to nurture infants and children while mothering is a biological 'event' associated with giving birth (see Barabara Waterman 2003, p. 40 & Richard K. reed 2005, p. 105). In this conversational platform, motherhood is presented as a concept and a process from the context of young mothers in Kenyan universities that calls for further dignity conversations. As a concept, motherhood is an inherent worth, an experience and a tutorial institution. As a process, it is a narrative of experience and scholarly conversational reflections (O'Reilly, 2012, pp. 2-5). It is from this perspective that one may ask, is it possible to steer conversations on challenges faced by young mothers who are students in Kenyan Universities? The dignity of young mothers pausing degrees in Kenyan Universities depends on the urgency to see motherhood a liberation discourse for gender equality.

The 'Curse' of Motherhood in Institutions of Higher Learning

For many contemporary African students in institutions of higher learning, motherhood is a source of shame and stigma (Okoro, 2020, p. 161). Giving birth in the traditional African society was a sacred phenomenon. Thus, women are mostly under pressure through the influence of the traditional African society to get married and get children; in order to express her womanhood through motherhood to the fullest (see Akujobi 2011, p. 3). That is why, barrenness is seen as a curse and barren women too are treated with scorn. The sacredness of motherhood is in the continuation of the life of an African community or a particular clan through procreation. Sadly, when one gets children outside of the marriage institution she is treated with suspicion. It is important to note that the sanctions that accompany adolescent sexual activities way heavily on girls because virginity is taken seriously in and highly rewarded African societal settings. When a girl becomes pregnant before marriage, she is blamed for it while the person who got her pregnant is not held accountable in most cases. That is why "feminists in Africa, have contented how motherhood may at times operate in an oppressive manner, and have tried to read other meanings to motherhood, meanings that are empowering for women" (see Akujobi 2011, p. 3).

It should be obvious that every adolescent teenager is sexually active if not sexually hyperactive. Adolescence is an age of sexual curiosity in which teenagers experiment on their sexual feelings and sexual organs without serious commitment. John O. G. Billy, Nancy S. Landale, William R. Grady & Denise M. Zimmerle (1988, p. 192) have observed that "participation in sexual intercourse during the early adolescent years marks a departure from social norms defining acceptable behavior for that age or life stage." Unfortunately, when a young girl becomes pregnant, the society blames a girl for acting foolish and 'getting pregnant.' Thus, many girls who get pregnant during adolescent try to hide the pregnancy while others attempt unsafe abortions because of the shame associated with being pregnant before marriage and the responsibility that comes with it especially for young girls in institutions of higher learning (Okoro, 2020, pp. 161-162).

In many African countries and especially Kenya, getting the opportunity to go to an institution of higher learning is prestigious yet comes with its challenges on matters beauty, sexual relationships and motherhood. A beautiful girl is expected to 'package' herself in a way that she looks as young as possible body wise because "when the beautiful woman appears in public, her appearance is usually marked by the dominance of the male gaze" (see Ann J. Cahill 2003, p. 60). While many male students in Kenyan universities are hesitant to date fellow students who have children because of the financial responsibilities

that come with it, a number of men do not want to marry girls who already have children because the woman's child is like extra baggage (Pranitha Maharaj & Thembaletu Shangase (2020, p. 11). Some who are lucky to get a partner, will still cater for herself financially and her child/ children. Most of the young mothers who are 'lucky' to get married in some communities are married off as second wives. Thus, some young mothers who are not able to abort hide that they have children; others abandon them near the gates of children homes while some are left with their grandmothers to raise them up (Okoro, 2020, pp. 161-162). Those who are courageous enough to raise their children while studying at the same time go through a lot of challenges especially those who come from poor families. Some fail to attend classes in order to take their sick children to hospital; others have to work part-time menial jobs in restaurants and bars. This they do in order to feed the children while others even opt to be commercial sex workers in order to afford a living and pay for their tuition fee since some of the girls are orphans (see Steve Mokaya 2021). In extreme cases, some have committed suicide due to depression leaving one to wonder whether motherhood is a curse for young girls in institutions of higher learning in the contemporary African society (see Christine W. Musyimi et al 2020).

Adolescent fertility should not be ignored. Reports from World Health Organization (WHO) (2023) show, that "adolescent pregnancies are a global problem occurring in high-, middle-, and low-income countries." WHO (2023) further notes, that "around the world, adolescent pregnancies are more likely to occur in marginalized communities, commonly driven by poverty and lack of education and employment opportunities." Unfortunately instead of offering support systems that can help adolescents in Africa to discover their sexuality without hurting themselves, teenagers have been taken through traumatizing experiences that leaves them with no choice but to enter on a mission of secrete sexual adventure. In the process, it is the girls who end up being pregnant and sometimes HIV positive. The church is supposed to give life and life in its fullness to all including young mothers in institutions of higher learning whom most of them are Christians (Okoro, 2020, p. 161). However, in many Christian settings when a young boy talks to a 'spiritual' father about masturbation or wet dreaming, he will be taken through a process of exorcism to rebuke the demons of masturbation (see Naomi Richman 2021, p. 261). On the other hand, girls who share the experience of having sex while dreaming are taken through a series of prayer and fasting in order to rebuke the demons that are having sex with young girls in dreams. Thus, many adolescent girls and boys continued to carry a heavy load of guilt thinking that any expression or experience of sexual feelings before marriage is a sin. The situation gets worse in case a girl gets pregnant in the process of sexual adventure. Some girls who get pregnant before marriage in some churches will be put under discipline there after taken through a rigorous session of holiness and repentance.

According to Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale & Herbert Moyo (2016, p. 90) "Christian churches value virginity as a sign of purity particularly for adolescent girls." While the contemporary African society and religious institutions are keen on discouraging teenage pregnancies on the grounds of morality, not much is being done to offer socio-economic support to young mothers in institutions of higher learning who have dared taken the challenge of ignoring the stigma associated with teenage pregnancies and the socio-economic challenges that come with it. In western countries, university managers and supervisors are supposed to give reasonable consideration to requests from staff and students to bring their children into University workplaces (including lecture theatres/tutorial rooms) where the request has been necessitated by unforeseen or unavoidable circumstances. In other words, bringing children in the university requires an official request that should be approved. On approval, parents and care givers will be responsible for the safety and supervision of their children. Whilst they are on University premises, they are required to comply

with University policies and procedures (Sydney University, 2010). Unfortunately, a number of student mothers in Kenyan Universities cannot afford caregivers who can stay with the children or private baby care services while they attend classes. Kenya has witnessed cases in which, a prominent politician dates a university student, and when she tells him that she is expectant of his child, the girl is found murdered (see the murder of Sharon Otieno a student of Rongo University, Migori County by Orinde, 2019 and Juma 2023, p. 2-4).

Motherhood, the Old Testament and African Woman's Perspective

In the Old Testament, motherhood is God's divine vessel, an educational institution and a higher calling. It is a crucial strand for exploring human life and its meaning. According to Tribble (1978, p. 34), "in the Hebrew scripture, wombs of women belong to God." Tribble (1978, p. 35) further points out that "a woman's womb is a physical object through which the deity acts." Thus in Mothering and motherhood, the formative life of an individual are shaped while tutorials for posterity are set (Jer. 1:5). Even so, within motherhood lies a deep tension between the pangs of pain, crisis, and association with death. In Isaiah 42:14 (NIV) it is written, "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant." In this passage, the concept of motherhood is used by the prophet Isaiah to compare God to a woman who is about to give birth. The description used by the prophet reflects the pain that comes with motherhood. During the time of labor, the woman cries, pants, and gasps for air. God here identifies with the suffering that comes with motherhood. It is from the same perspective that one encounters the pangs of pain that comes with motherhood in the Old Testament which includes economically providing for a child (Prov. 31:10-31) and the responsibility of moral teaching lest a child be a burden and shame to a mother (Prov. 10:1)

Deuteronomy 6:4 emphasizes on teaching children about the mothering nature of God who broods over humanity in a motherly way (Ruth 2:12). From an Old Testament perspective, motherhood is divine (Okoro, 2020, p. 46), but also a source of struggle and pain to shield children from the foolishness that brings sorrow to her mother (Prov. 10:1). In the Old Testament, motherhood is a teaching institution for children on matters morals, a correctional facility for rebuking children who are using their energy for sex and money on seductive women. It is a rehabilitation center for children who are drinking themselves to death while at the same time, an institution of higher learning that prepares societal leaders for leadership responsibilities that enabled them to be the voice of the voiceless as indicated in Proverbs 31:1-9. While mothers were endowed with societal educational structures and institutions for morality, and providing for the family, some men were seating idle at the city gate receiving praises for getting hardworking wives while others were wondering where to get noble wives of Proverbs 31:10-31. One therefore continues to ask, is motherhood a curse or a divine vessel, an educational institution and a higher calling?

An African Women's perspective to motherhood argues that motherhood shapes a woman's socioeconomic status and identity while at the same time informs the political structure and socioeconomic ideology of the African society (Lal, 2015, pp. 78-80). In fact, motherhood is the back born of the matrilineal and patrilineal ties that inform the political structure of the African society. Motherhood embodies the connection between clans of patrilineal contexts and relations because mothers come from a different clan from that of their children. African Women's perspective on motherhoods identifies with the fact that children in the African traditional society were highly regarded. Even orphans were protected by the structures of the society through wife inheritance (Wilfred, 2014, pp. 111-112). An expectant mother was protected because the

society believed that by protecting the mother and the unborn child, the clan was protected. Unfortunately, when one sees the struggles that young student mothers in Kenyan universities go through in trying to juggle between acquiring education and raising children, one wonders whether motherhood is a curse or a blessing. In search for the true concept of the African Ubuntu spirit – the I am because you are and because you are therefore we are it is important to reimagine the concept of motherhood from the context of the experiences of young mothers in Kenyan universities (Thompson & Lief, 2015).

Notably, African communities have changed over time especially in the postcolonial Africa (see Mueni wa Muiu 2010, p. 1333). By analogy, the traditional family structure that valued procreation as a strong strand for life continuation has changed. The concept of motherhood has also gone through social transformation hence the need to reevaluate the concept of motherhood. Even so, the traditional African setting in which African mothers find economic and social security through mothering especially in regards to the number of children still continues (Stephens, 2013). This is so, especially in the postcolonial African where poverty is gendered. It has been pointed out, that women are the majority of the world’s poor while their disproportionate share of poverty is rising relative to men thanks to the feminization of household headship where women headed households are the poorest (Chant, 2007, pp. 1-3). Arguably, one major reason as to why poverty continues to be gendered is because young student mothers in institutions of higher learning have been left on their own, to raise children while at the same time struggle to earn a possible life changing university degree. It is from this context that this conversational platform proposes a reconstruction and reinterpretation of motherhood as an inherently sacred and educational institution. The emphasis should be on creating structures to accommodate mothers and their children in institutions of higher learning as a way of addressing the ‘curse’ of motherhood. There is need for fresh perspective on educational policies in regards to motherhood and parenting in the contemporary African society given the fact that the family institutions has been threatened, destabilized and restructured (Chant, 2007, pp.78-88) because of unforeseen circumstances such as the educational policies that allows for both boys and girls do acquire education at an equal level.

Observation and Recommendations

Some Kenyan Universities have a strong blended tutorial system that offers both online and face-to-face. Firstly, there is need for the education sector in Kenya to integrate gendered policies into educational policies that enable young mothers to benefit from such blended systems of education at the comfort of their homes. World Vision (2012) quotes Hillary Rodham Clinton who spoke during the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women saying, “If women are educated, their families will flourish. If women have a chance to work and earn as full and equal partners in society, their families will flourish. And when families flourish, communities and nations do as well.” For this to happen, it is recommended that baby care centers should be established in institutions of higher learning as a second strategy so as to free young student mothers from the burden of worrying about the children while at the same time studying.

Thirdly, there is need to integrate secondary motherhood and parenthood tutorials in educational programs of higher learning. Notably, some of the children who are young mothers today were also children of young mothers (see Francesca Devaney Callan & Elizabeth M. Dolan 2013, p. 157). Some of the mothers of young mothers in Kenyan universities never got the privilege of being mentored by their mothers on motherhood. This presents the need for the intergradation of secondary motherhood in the curriculums of Kenyan universities. Secondary motherhood and parenthood will help pass on the African traditional motherhood

tutorials from a mother to her girl hence building a society that is morally upright. Last but not least, there is a need to include mothering financial support for young mothers in university budgets. This way, young student mothers in institutions of higher learning will receive financial support that will ease the burden of financial responsibility that comes with being a young mother in an institution of higher learning. Can one conclude by still saying motherhood is a curse? Motherhood remains a conversational platform and a liberation discourse that can allow for motherhood dignity talk for the dignity of a young student mother in an institution of higher learning.

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