

## **Challenges Facing Nursing Mothers in Distance Learning in the Upper West Region of Ghana: A Recipe for Policy Formulation.**

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### **Abstract**

*It is obvious that women will love to have children for their husbands in the Ghanaian society. However, with the increasing responsibilities of women in society it has become a challenge for women to have children while fulfilling their new responsibilities in society. Before now the core role of women in society was to produce children, cook for their husbands, and respond to their sexual advances when needed. On the other hand, men work to bring resources home. The situation has changed in contemporary times whereby women have to work to support their husbands to keep the home financially. The purpose of the study is to identify and evaluate the educational challenges facing nursing mothers on distance education programs in the Upper West Region of Ghana. It is also to identify strategies and interventions in dealing with nursing mothers to create a healthy learning environment for academic success. The study adopted a case study design, and purposive sampling was used to select all available nursing mothers taking part in College of Distance Education University of Cape Coast distance education program. A questionnaire was used to gather information from thirty-one (31) nursing mothers. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and analysis. The results show that nursing mothers face numerous challenges while seeking for further education. The major ones been the lack of accommodation for their babies and babysitters, and competing equally with other students in terms of time during the examination. The nursing mothers suggested separate room for them during examinations as well as extra time for the inconveniences the babies create during examinations.*

### **Background to the Study**

There is enough literature to show that education is the wheel for the development of people and a nation (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Governments across the world are putting in more resources to develop the education sector because they know that education is the key to development. Other organizations that are partners in development do not hesitate to contribute to the development of education in the country they are operating. The development of education in a country starts with the people who enroll in the schools provided by the education sector. The development of every person matters in society. Therefore, governments are concerned about the number of people enrolling in schools. They usually advocate for compulsory enrollment. Thus, we have policies such as the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) in Ghana that aims at making education free and compulsory to every Ghanaian (Ministry of Education, 2013). In modern times, the definitions of what constitute schooling or education have changed drastically. The reason for the change has been the adoption of distance education as another form of providing education to the citizenry. Distance education is fairly new in the Ghanaian context as compared to other countries like the US, Canada and India. Since its inception, it has become one of the fastest growing educational programmes in the country as compared with other educational interventions such as the non-formal educational system. Today, over thousands of students are offering distance learning programmes across the many tertiary educational institutions in the country. Among these students are nursing mothers who are of great interest to the current research. Common observation indicates that you can identify one nursing mothers among every twenty students in distance learning in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Students in distance learning in the Upper West Region of Ghana are expected to attend face-to-face sessions, write teacher made test quizzes and also submit assignments.

They are also mandated to write end of semester examination. During the face-to-face sessions, students are expected to write notes and contribute to discussions. Depending on the level students are expected to complete not less than twenty courses per the entire program or seventy-two credit hours. Considering the heavy responsibilities placed on the distance learner there is no choice but for the researcher to speculate on how the nursing mothers in distance learning cope with the situation for academic excellence (Edwards, Hanson, and Ragatt, 1996). It is very likely to think that the nursing mother in distance education faces a lot of challenges. However, that perception is for the nursing mother to decide. Studies have shown that where there is adult learning there is bound to be nursing mothers. Currently, there are an increasing number of students getting pregnant while in school, and it cut across all levels of the adult education ladder. There are instances whereby girls have dropped out of school due to pregnancy-related cases (Amina, 2015). However, lifelong education is giving women the chance to school and have babies at the same time. The opportunity comes with its challenges since nursing mothers sometimes skip school to take care of their sick babies. When babies are brought to face-to-face centres, mothers may have to share time for discussions with cleaning up dirt from babies due to their activities. It is very common for nursing mothers to absent themselves from face-to-face sessions due to their babies' ill health. Also, they have to feed babies intermittently at the expense of taking part in discussions.

Society expects a lot from adults. Adults are given the responsibility of socializing the younger and upcoming generation. This responsibility cannot function well if the adult expectations and abilities are not coherent with the youth they are supposed to guide. It is expected that people at early adulthood would have achieved their educational aspirations. These aspirations include acquiring skills, and knowledge that will make them useful to society. They can be made useful in the sense that they can add to the growth rate of the economy. It is against this background that adults in society see the need to have an education to the highest level so that they can function effectively as adults in society. The idea of adults venturing into education comes with its set of challenges. Governments are making provision for nursing mothers to take care of their babies' whiles they work. A case in point is where the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends exclusive breastfeeding for at least the first six months of the life of every baby (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2013). Thus, the government has to put in place policies to ensure that nursing mothers can breastfeed their babies while they work. When students find themselves as nursing mothers, then they are playing the role of mothers and students at the same time. This role can be a challenging one and for that matter needs attention from all stakeholders of education just like the case of the nursing/working mother. Adults who are engaged in schooling have a higher responsibility to accomplish as compared to students who in their prime age. The reason given was that most adult learners are engaged in educational activities and mothering as well. It is true that adult learners have challenges to face, but they can overcome these challenges by defining their internal purpose of life. Once they have clear cut visions of life they can play their role diligently to achieve those purposes of life.

Support services are an essential element in the life of a student. However, findings from a study conducted by Dhillon, McGowan, and Wang (2015) indicated that there are discrepancies between the officially declared provision of the services and the realities on the ground. In other words, the accessibility and use of these services in practice does not reflect the real situation at hand. An adult learner can succeed in their multiple roles when exposed to student support services. It can enable them live a balanced life full of purposes and achievements, away from the stress and challenges emanating from the multiple responsibility they have to accomplish. Currently, there is no separate curriculum for adult learners, and they have to battle it out with all the other competitors in the education field. Parenting and schooling are two great exercises that do not compromise each other. In some cases, mothers look for babysitters to take care of the babies while they attend school. Not all mothers are privileged to hire the services of a babysitter. Thus, the work of babysitting is done by the mothers while they school also. We may want to ask ourselves if it is right to have babies

while schooling. The answer is a yes no situation because some nursing mothers may end up losing everything if they fail to secure the right grades to sustain them in school. On the other hand, they lack the full attention for their babies because they are in class at a time the baby needs them (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2013). The situation can be critical to the extent that babies become sick and lose their lives. Deciding to have babies while schooling is a big challenge. It is a decision to be taken and been ready to face the challenges. The challenge ranges from their social roles, academic roles, and family roles. These roles are very significant in the life of the adult because they serve as the benchmark upon which the adult status is measured. Each of the social group has a role to play. The youth and the early adulthood have their role to play. The adult also has their role to play. Together, these roles represent a network of cohesion that moves nations forward.

In most cases, the way forward is for the nursing mother to hire a babysitter. In the Upper West Region is not a professional business. It is done locally, with young girls who may also be schooling or are out of school for various reasons including poverty. Even the idea of a babysitter comes with mix feelings. The reason is that society has negative ideas about what babysitters does to babies left in their care. According to Nash (2010), articles about babysitting focus on behaviour issues of girls offering those services. They portray them as disruptive and irresponsible in their duties towards the babies under their care. Also, they also lack proper maternalism (Nash, 2010). According to Tomlin (2008), Socialization is crucial in the development process of a child. Socialization offers an opportunity for children to become functioning members of society. Thus, children take on the values and beliefs of the society they belong. Various societies have suggested ways of bringing up children to socialize them into the larger community. Failure to do so can result in bringing up children into adults who do not fit well into society. The idea of men taking part in babysitting has met with serious challenges in some societies where they believe it is the sole responsibility of women. It also include other believes such as the place of a woman is in the kitchen (Skjortnes & Zachariassen, 2010). While parents play their role in the socialization process, the media also complement their efforts through video games, newspapers, comic books, radio, magazines, movies, and the television (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010).

There is a common belief that babies are from God in the African traditional religion. The perception has influence people attitude towards family life issues. The result is that less precaution is given to when to have babies. In some jurisdictions, it is prohibited to practice family planning. A decision to practice family planning can result in a woman losing her marriage. Men should have equal responsibility of baby nursing to ease the tension on nursing mothers. In line with this view, the feminist theory advocates for equality between males and females in the area of their traditional duties and responsibilities. For example, babysitting is seen as a female responsibility when it should have been treated as a social responsibility for both males and females. Thus, the feminist theory advocates for shared responsibility when it comes to nursing babies. The idea of men taking part in the nursing of babies has met with several challenges. It is a relatively new concept in the African traditional societies, and men have opposed to it believing women want to subvert their powers as heads of the family. In some cases, the issue have led to a breakdown in marriages simple because some women want to exercise their rights.

Whether nursing mothers who are into distance learning programs are knowledgeable about family life education, is another issue that needs to be an investigation. However, one fact is clear which is that nursing mothers will gain a lot from knowing family life education (Goldin, and Katz, 2008). The program teaches participants on when, how, where, what are necessary when we chose to have babies. All persons entering an adult life that include getting marriage must be introduced to family life education. It will prepare them for motherhood and parenting as well. It may also help them to make informed decisions as to when to have babies (Goldin, and Katz, 2008). According to a report by Boulton-Lewis (2010) populations are ageing rapidly, and it is expected that adult population in the USA will be about 20% in 2020. Similarly, the adult population in Hong Kong will shoot up to 24% by

2025. The implication is that education for the elderly will be a major issue by 2025 and 2020 in Hong Kong and the USA respectively. Thus, understanding and providing for lifelong education must be an important issue for the twenty-first-century education planners.

Women on distance education programmes are permitted to have children while taking part in their studies. The only expected of them is to accomplish the entire task assigned to them as students. It is, therefore, not surprising to see pregnant women and nursing mothers during face-to-face sessions at learning. The gap here is that we assume some of the things nursing mothers pass through during face-to-face sessions without considering from nursing mothers' perspective what they go through during face-to-face sessions. Therefore, the aim of the researcher is to find out what problems nursing mothers face during face-to-face sessions, and what can be done to enhance the learning atmosphere for themselves and their babies. The purpose of the research is to identify the educational challenges facing nursing mothers on College of Distance Education University of Cape Coast distance education programme in the Upper West Region. It is also to identify strategies and interventions in dealing with nursing mothers to create a healthy learning environment for academic success. The objectives of the study are:

- To seek information on the challenges nursing mother face when they attend face-to-face sessions at the study centres.
- To seek information on how the nursing mothers can be made comfortable during face-to-face sessions at the study centres.
- To add information to the database on the challenges facing nursing mother during face-to-face sessions at the study centres.

The following research questions are set to guide the collection of data to answer the research problem.

- What are the challenges facing nursing mothers during face-to-face sessions?
- What are the solutions to enhance a healthy learning environment for nursing mothers in distance education programs?

The research is significant to the extent that it will reveal the challenges nursing mothers pass through to acquire education. It will also inform susceptible students about the pros and cons of carrying a pregnancy through to delivery and becoming nursing mothers in distance education programme. The findings can serve as a resource document to address the educational needs of pregnant and nursing mothers in distance learning institutions. The study is delimited to nursing mothers in College of Distance Education University of Cape Coast in the Upper West Region of Ghana for proximity reasons (Creswell, 2009). Secondly, the study is delimited to nursing mothers in distance education because they are directly affected and ready to give information that will help to enhance their learning.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Functionalist's theory sees society as a system that is made up of organs and units that perform their functions to maintain society (Fletcher, 2011). We can liken the family as one of the units that handle procreation to sustain society. The moment the family becomes dysfunctional you disallowing marriage to take place, procreation will cease causing a societal dis-equilibrium. Childbirth is a normal activity for all adults in society. Whatever circumstance childbirth occur, whether as a student, a worker, or homemaker is a normal activity. Adult education must not disrupt the order and flow of the family system. What government must do is to adjust to the needs of the adult learner to achieve stability and continuity (Fletcher, 2011). That is why the current study is adopting the functionalist's theory as a framework for supporting and promotes solidarity and stability among students on distance learning programs. The reason is that each student is also doubling as a nursing mother is a function of society and the educational system. While the government makes an effort to integrate all persons in the education sector, it is the responsibilities of the student nursing mothers to take advantage of the situation to education themselves to earn gainful employment.

## Methodology

The methodology aspect of a study is very crucial because it provides the reader with information on how the study was conducted. In other words, it gives the reader the opportunity to determine whether the study is valid and reliable (Creswell, 2013). Usually, the section provides a precise and unambiguous description of the methods used to arrive at conclusions. Thus, Paton (2002) explains that it is very crucial to indicate why certain methods were chosen for the study. Case study design was adopted as the best research design for the study. According to Creswell (2009) a case study design is compatible with the description of events in a natural setting. It is also relevant for the study because it focuses on the experiences of the participants in a particular location.

The population comprises of all nursing mothers participating in the University of Cape Coast College of Distance Education program. Specifically, the study took into consideration the nursing mothers at the Wa study centre in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The current total number of nursing mothers in the program is thirty-one (31). Thus, purposive sampling was used to select all the nursing mothers to participate in the study. The objective of the study is not to generalize the results, but to seek particular challenges facing the nursing mothers at the study centre (Patton, 2002). It is difficult to defend the representativeness of a purposively selected sample. However, purposeful sampling is used to ensure that, opinions gathered are a true reflection of the opinions of nursing mothers in the Wa study centre (Dawidowicz, 2010).

The most appropriate data collection instrument for the study is a questionnaire. Questionnaires are useful tools for analyzing opinions; it enabled the researcher to collect and analyze the challenges facing nursing mothers in distance learning programs with specific reference to distance education programs offered by College of Distance Education University of Cape Coast. Some of the advantages of using questionnaires are that they ensure anonymity, and also grant the members the opportunity to attend to the questionnaire at their convenience time (Patton, 2002). The questionnaire carried a total of eight items. The first two questions sought the members' level of study while the second question seeks to find out how old the child is. The researcher assumes that older children are not supposed to be carried to learning centres. All mothers with children above two years are considered as older, and their responses to the questionnaire were not considered in the discussions and conclusions. Fortunately, no response to the question on the age of the baby met the criteria for rejection. Thus, all the thirty-one questionnaires were assumed useful for the study. The remaining six items provided answers to the two main research questions. Two weeks was used to collect data from the members, and the data were collected personally.

Data analyses were primarily descriptive. Each item on the questionnaire is analyzed and explained according to shared views. Data on all items were presented using frequencies and percentages. The idea of using frequencies and percentages is to ensure a better and easy presentation of results for analysis. Data from items 6, 7, and 8 were similar. To avoid duplication of Tables response from the three items were merged and presented in Table 6.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis was carried out on all the six items presented to members on the questionnaire. The results presentation and analysis are organized to answer the two research questions set to guide the conduct of the study.

**Table 1:** Level of Study

Variables	Frequency	%
Level 100	16	53
Level 200	01	03
Level 300	11	37
Level 400	02	07

Level 500	Nil	Nil
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>(100.0%)</b>

Table 1 shows that most of the nursing mothers (53%) are in level 100. 37% are in level 300 while 03% and 07% are in level 200 and 400 respectively. The implication is that the students came into the program with pregnancies. It could be that they were not sure they will participate in schooling but rather got the admission to access education. Level 300 is a final year level for diploma certificates, and the students probably think they have almost completed and can start family life.

**Table 2:** Age of Child

Variables	Frequency	%
Less than 2 Years	31	100
Above 2 Years	Nil	00
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>(100.0%)</b>

All the members' babies were less than two years. Thus, all the questionnaires were useful in to the study and were utilized in the discussions.

**Table 3:** Summary of Responses on the challenges nursing mothers face during face-to-face sessions at the study centre

Multiple Responses	Frequencies
Feeding child while lectures go on	4
Moving out to check on baby and baby sitter	2
No care taker to support nursing mother	1
No baby centre at the study centre	2
Baby cries during lectures making myself /other students uncomfortable	10
Lecture hall very hot for the baby	1
Baby moves around the lecture hall creating distractions	9
Spend lots of money to get a baby sitter	2
Miss first lesson because you have to settle the baby first before lectures	1
Less concentration	10
Stress	1

A quick look at the summary of results on Table 3 shows ten members indicating that their babies cry a lot during lectures making them uncomfortable alongside other students. It is common to hear babies cry during lectures prompting their mothers to leave the lecture scene to attend to them. In some cases, some may not return to the particular lecture. It was in the right direction when the same number of members indicated they have less concentration during lectures. It is difficult to listen to lectures when your baby is crying making you and others in class uncomfortable. It goes to support the issue of how the nursing mothers in distance learning cope for academic excellence (Edwards, Hanson, and Ragatt, 1996). The other significant challenges nursing mothers face during face-to-face sessions include; feeding their babies in lecture halls, or moving out to check on the baby and the babysitter occasionally. The act of checking out on a babysitter is supported by the fact that they lack proper maternalism (Nash, 2010). Thus, mothers do not feel comfortable leaving their babies all alone with babysitters. While some find it a challenge moving in and out to check on baby and babysitter, a member indicated she could not afford for a babysitter. Other challenges are that there are no baby centers and for that matter babies are left to play around while lectures go on. It creates a lot of distractions that sometimes affects the lecture delivery. It is a stressful situation and no mean activity. Perhaps, that is why only one student in level 200 is a nursing mother. Having noticed the experience in level 100, they are not willing to repeat the situation of being a nursing mother.

**Table 4:** Summary of Responses on the challenges facing nursing mothers during quiz sessions at the study centre

Multiple Responses	Frequencies
There is divided attention and sometimes mistakes set in	4
Children are not allowed inside the examination hall	2
No money to get the support of a baby sitter	1
Spend quizzes time to take care of baby	9
Baby disturbs others in the examination hall	5
Less time to revise by taking care of baby	1
No place to house baby and baby sitter at the study centre	3
Less concentration during to baby's activities	3
Extra time for nursing mothers during examinations	6

The challenges nursing mothers face during quiz sessions are not quite different from the face-to-face sessions. The results are displayed in Table 4. The most challenge facing nursing mothers is having to Spend quizzes time to take care of baby needs. In the process of the examination, some nursing mothers have to leave the examination hall to attend to their babies. It consumes time. However, no added on time is given to them. In line with this fact, the members were quick to ask for extra time during the examination. They also mentioned less concentration due to baby's activities. Some of the children are toddlers and will want to move around freely, controlling their movement and writing at the same time affects their concentration tremendously. They also mention the situation where babies are not allowed inside the examination room. Meanwhile, there is no baby centre to cater for the babies. At home, they spent less time to revise for examination because the time is shared with taking care of the baby while studying at the same time. Thus, the idea of men taking part in babysitting has to be visited on a more serious note. The belief that it is the sole responsibility of women should be eradicated (Skjortnes & Zachariassen, 2010).

**Table 5:** Summary of Responses on the challenges facing nursing mothers during examination sessions at the study centre

Multiple Responses	Frequencies
Mother goes to attend to child whiles examination goes on	7
No additional time given to nursing mothers	3
No time to prepare adequately for examination	5
There is lack of concentration	5
Spend a lot of money to seek baby sitter assistance	1
Baby crying causes lots of inconvenience to other	4
No place to house baby and baby sitters	1
Sitting arrangements not favorable sometimes	1
Child refuses to stay with baby sitter or father	1
Extra time for nursing mothers	3
Babies are starved due to the long hours slated for exams	1

Challenges faced during the examination are similar to those of quizzes sessions by the nursing mothers. Two unique challenges were that of starving babies due to the longer time involved in examinations. Usually examination takes up to three hours while quizzes are just thirty minutes. The members also complain of poor sitting arrangements. Where they sit to write examinations give them a lot of inconveniences when they want to move out to cater for their babies. Mother goes to attend to child whiles examination goes on; no additional time given to nursing mothers; and no time to prepare adequately for examination are among the challenges that discussed already under the challenges nursing mothers face during quizzes sessions. In the words of one of the members this is what she wrote "my child always cried whenever I want to write, and will not go to the baby nurse or the father. It is affecting my performance because holding a child with one hand and writing with the other is not easy at

all". It is not only the nursing mothers that are affected in such circumstances. From the data gathered, there is an indication that other students are equally affected. The activities of babies at the study center attract the attention of all students including the course tutors. The situation is reflected on the results of the study when some of the members appeal to colleague students and course tutors to be patient with nursing mothers. There is a crucial indication by the members that when the child is crying during examination you become confused, and cannot even recollect what you studied for the examination. It is very crucial that institutions adjust to the needs of the students who are nursing mothers. It will ensure stability and continuity since adult learning cannot be devoid of nursing mothers and sometimes nursing fathers as well (Fletcher, 2011).

**Table 6:** Summary of Responses on what can be done to create a better learning environment for the nursing mother during face-to-face, quizzes, and examination sessions

Multiple Responses	Frequencies
Crèche/play ground for nursing mothers babies at the study centre	28
Extra classes for nursing mothers	7
Institution should provide baby sitters at centres	1
Other students and tutors should be patience and understanding	8
Place nursing mothers in a separate room for examinations	8
Give extra time to nursing mothers to complete their teacher made test	31
Lessons start too early	1
Encourage nursing mothers to learn	2
Nursing mothers should be seated in front to enable movement to and fro	1
Nursing mothers should come along with baby sitters	3

In a bit to find out what can be done to make learning a smooth occasion for nursing mothers this is what they have to say: That the institution must give extra time to nursing mothers to complete their teacher made test, quizzes, and examination as well. The request for an extra time comes from the fact that they spend part of the examination time to nurse their babies. It is a call in the right direction and just as Fletcher (2011) said it is important we maintain a balance in society because procreation is as good as education. They also advocated for a Crèche or playground for nursing mothers babies at the study centre. It is also a good suggestion because professional care for babies will ease the minds of nursing mothers and grant them the maximum attention they need during examination and face-to-face sessions.

Other suggestions include place nursing mothers in a separate room for examinations. They also called on other students and tutors to be patience and understanding. The call comes in connection with how other students get irritated with the distractions babies caused during face-to-face sessions and examinations. According to the nursing mothers, lessons start rather too early. They need to prepare and cater for their babies before they can report to the study center. Thus, when lessons start too early, they find it difficult participating in first lectures of the day.

## Conclusion

The objective of the study is to seek information on the challenges nursing mother face when they attend face-to-face sessions at the study centres. It was also aimed at seeking information on how nursing mothers can be made comfortable during face-to-face sessions at the study centres. The results have indications to prove that nursing mothers have numerous challenges during face-to-face sessions. There are other peculiar challenges they face during other activities at the learning centres such as the end of semester examinations, quizzes, and assignments. A quick glance at the results shows that the biggest challenges nursing mothers face at the study center in Wa are spending lecture periods to nurse babies, and also lack baby centers to accommodate babies while mothers attend lectures. The others are spending examination time to attend to babies and lack of resources to hire babysitters. The following



solutions can be adopted from the suggestions they made: Extra time to write examination and quizzes, and a separate room for nursing mothers during examinations. The others are a baby center to accommodate babies, and tolerance towards babies and their mothers during face-to-face sessions as well as during examination and quizzes. When these solutions are implemented, it will enhance a healthy learning environment for nursing mothers in distance education programs.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher recommends a study of how the activities of nursing mothers affect other students at the learning centre.

### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to acknowledge the support from my family both in-kind and financially. I will also like to thank Ms. Winifred Walier an Assistant Administrator at College of Distance Education for editing the document.

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South American Journal of Academic Research  
Special Edition May 2016

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