

## **Responsibilities and Challenges of Student Mothers in Tanzania's Secondary Schools**

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### **Abstract**

Adolescent motherhood poses significant challenges, especially for student mothers who must juggle parenting and education, unlike their peers who either attend school without children or parent without engaging in education. This paper explores the responsibilities and challenges faced by adolescent student mothers in secondary schools in Tanzania. An embedded single case study approach was employed, focusing on student mothers as the primary case and five secondary schools as units of analysis. Data were gathered through open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions and analysed thematically. Insights from 20 purposively chosen student mothers indicated that they manage numerous responsibilities both inside and outside the school setting. These responsibilities include academic, parental, entrepreneurial, and marital duties (especially within convenience marriages). The overlap of these roles led to role conflict, frequent absenteeism, diminished focus in class, discrimination, and stigmatisation, all of which collectively obstructed their academic achievements. The study underscores the pressing need for targeted interventions from education stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and policymakers, to cultivate a supportive environment. The study concludes that support should include financial aid and comprehensive guidance and counselling services to improve the educational experiences of student mothers.

**Keywords:** Challenges; motherhood; responsibilities; schooling; student mothers

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### **Introduction and Background**

Education is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of socioeconomic development (United Nations, 2015). Yet, mothers in Tanzania encounter unique obstacles in accessing and completing secondary education, primarily due to gender-based inequities and socioeconomic challenges (Dhaka & Musese, 2019). Although the government has implemented supportive initiatives, such as the re-admission circular to ease school re-entry (MoEST, 2021), various media platforms—including television and newspapers—still report on the ongoing barriers and lived experiences of student mothers, despite these policies designed to assist them (Loshilaa, 2022; Mwalongo, 2023). These difficulties are often exacerbated by financial strain and social stigma. However, limited literature examines how exactly student mothers navigate their dual roles in life. Drawing on Lazarus' Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory (CMRT) (1991), this paper investigates the lived experiences of student mothers in Tanzanian secondary schools,

emphasising the responsibilities they bear and the challenges they face. This theoretical perspective illuminates how these mothers interpret and respond to their situations, providing insights into the complex relationship between personal meaning-making and systemic constraints. Ultimately, the study enriches the broader discourse on gender, education, and social justice in Tanzania, suggesting pathways for more effective educational policies and practices that better support student mothers in their academic journeys.

### **An overview of the education system in Tanzania**

Tanzania's formal education system follows a 1+6+4+2/3+3+ system, with pre-primary education for children aged from 5 years, compulsory primary education structured for a child aged from 6 years from standard I-VI (for both girls and boys), ordinary secondary education accessed by a child aged from 13 years, from form I-IV, and advanced secondary education accessed by a child aged from 17 years with fee-free attainment (URT, 2023). Schools can be single-sex or co-sex schools, becoming more popular in urban areas. Education is mandatory from Standard I to Form IV, with 3 years and above for higher learning education.

According to recent data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS), females continue to lag behind boys in global school enrolment, participation, completion and performance (UIS, 2018). For example, of the 263 million out-of-school children in 2016, 131.7 million were girls (UIS, 2018). In 2016, Sub-Saharan Africa had 96.9 million out-of-school children (44.7% males and 52.2% girls) (UIS, 2018). Tanzania ranks among Sub-Saharan countries with low female attendance, high dropout rates, and poor secondary school performance (Iddy, 2021). For instance, in 2019, female participation in O-level secondary schools increased more than males (1,133.09 males and 1,205.4 females). However, female participation in A-level secondary schools remained lower than males. For instance, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) ranges between 0.5 and 0.7 over 14 years (2004-2017), indicating a significant gender imbalance in access to Advanced Secondary Education. Specifically, the number of boys who accessed Advanced Level Secondary Education is 30-50% higher than that of girls. Meanwhile, in 2019, only 52% of girls completed compulsory primary school, only 34% completed their secondary education, and only 27% of girls completed their upper school in Tanzania (UNICEF, 2022). Intervention measures are needed to increase girls' access to education (URT, 2020).

Unfortunately, secondary school girls face numerous challenges, including early pregnancy, poverty, distance to resources, cultural traditions, and patriarchal norms, hindering their education and highlighting the need for better support (Iddy, 2021). For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), teenage pregnancy rates are estimated to be 18.8% and 19.3% (Sully et al., 2020). For example, in East Africa, teenage pregnancy rates are 21.5 per cent higher than in Sub-Saharan Africa records (Kassa et al., 2018). In Tanzania, which ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in Africa with the highest adolescent pregnancy rates, over 132 out of every 1000 girls aged 15-19 years become mothers each year (UNFPA, 2019). By 2016, one in four adolescent girls aged 15-19 had begun childbearing. Literature indicates that factors that accelerate early pregnancy and motherhood include lack of knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, unfriendly adolescent health services, long distances to and from schools in some rural areas, and poverty, which leads parents to choose early marriage for bride price, hence early pregnancy (Mwashamba, 2022). However, Teenagers in rural areas are considerably more likely to have begun childbearing than

their urban counterparts: 32 per cent of rural teenagers have had a live birth or are pregnant, compared with 19 per cent of urban teenagers (UNFPA, 2019).

Tanzania has certain laws that respect girls' right to education. However, there are gaps in gender equality and empowerment. However, other rules, policies, and practices undermine this right. Tanzania's Marriage Act of 1971, Article 13(1), sets a minimum marriage age of 15 years for girls and 18 years for boys (URT, 1971). This statute contradicts Tanzania's statute of the Child Act, which defines a child as someone under 18 years of age (Article 4, subsection 1, URT, 2009). In other words, the law promotes child marriage. In reality, child marriage has several detrimental consequences for girls' lives as it takes girls out of school for conjugal duties, limiting their educational opportunities (Iddy, 2021). Secondary education in Tanzania is critical in influencing young people's future, linking basic education and chances for further education or vocational training (Iddy, 2021). Girls who leave school for marriage miss out on their right to education, which can empower them to positively impact their lives, families, societies, and the nation (Iddy, 2021).

### ***The need to enrol adolescent mothers in schools***

Education provides knowledge and skills with the potential for economic empowerment, improved livelihoods, and social development (Udofia & Gberevbie, 2019). The World Bank (2016) states that education is a fundamental human right and is central to unleashing human capabilities. Most teenage mothers are below the legal working age (18 years) and possess low education levels without vocational skills; therefore, they cannot secure employment (Niboye, 2018; Metta et al., 2020). When a girl leaves school, her life can change dramatically: her education ends, her job prospects diminish, and her vulnerability increases, making her more susceptible to the cycle of poverty, early marriages, and the burdens of teen motherhood (Dlamini, 2016). Thus, there is a need to assist them in completing their education by re-admitting them into formal and non-formal schools rather than allowing them to become part of a cohort of young girls with limited education and few opportunities.

HakiElimu (2019) reports that the educational system of any society is a complex social mechanism designed to instil certain skills and attitudes that are considered valuable and desirable in that society. Therefore, it is crucial to help teenage mothers rejoin schools, develop to their full potential, and transform their lives and those of their babies (Metta et al., 2020; Oluseye, 2021).

### ***Student mothers' context of schooling after re-admission***

Although the Tanzanian government has issued circulars indicating that student mothers should be re-integrated into the formal education system (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2021), the actual implementation significantly deviates from this directive. In reality, student mothers and others who leave school for various reasons are enrolled in the Alternative Education Pathways (AEP). These AEP initiatives are coordinated by the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) as part of the broader Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (EQUIP), which began in 2020 through a partnership between the (URT, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

Under the SEQUIP AEP framework, these students are placed in designated government day secondary schools and grouped in special classes separate from mainstream students. A key aspect of this approach is the two-in-one system, which condenses the standard curriculum to allow students to complete two academic years within a single school calendar year. This move

implies covering Forms One and Two studies in the first year and Forms Three and Four in the second year before taking their national examinations. This model aims to accelerate learning for students who previously dropped out and is delivered by government-employed teachers at the assigned schools (URT, 2020; World Bank, 2020). However, while this model offers a flexible route back to education, its reliance on the IAE raises concerns about inconsistencies in policy implementation, particularly since the re-admission policy promotes re-entry into the formal education system. Consequently, the situation highlights a disconnect between policy intent and actual practice, especially for student mothers who are encouraged to re-integrate into the standard school system yet find themselves in semi-formal learning pathways.

### ***Setbacks expected***

The rapid pace of the two-in-one system presents both benefits and challenges. It enables student mothers to complete their education more quickly, but the increased workload can feel overwhelming, particularly when balancing academic responsibilities with parenting (Prajapati et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2017). Furthermore, this accelerated curriculum might lack the depth of the traditional system, potentially compromising the education quality for student mothers (World Bank, 2020). Although being in a separate class taught by the same teachers as mainstream classes ensures consistency, this arrangement can lead to varying experiences. It may disrupt the learning dynamics for student mothers (Human Rights Watch, 2017). While the familiar school environment offers some comfort, separating from the mainstream could result in feelings of isolation and stigma for student mothers (Katz et al., 2016). Additionally, this situation may affect the learning experiences of re-joined students, as other student mothers attend classes with their children (Mwakililo et al., 2025).

### **Global context**

Across various global regions, young mothers balancing their studies with parenting encounter significant challenges. Research from Iran, Australia, the Caribbean, and Sub-Saharan Africa over different periods reveals that these mothers navigate a complex journey influenced by societal expectations and economic hardships (Mangeli et al., 2019; Bellamy et al., 2017; Okeyo, 2016). For instance, a study by Mangeli et al. (2019) in Iran shows that student mothers carry an increased responsibility load, face physical health issues, lack sufficient support, and experience emotional distress and mental strain, along with conflicts in their roles, all while pursuing their educational goals.

In the Caribbean, research shows that young mothers struggle with stigma and feelings of hopelessness related to balancing motherhood and their studies (Bellamy et al., 2017). Similarly, in Australia, studies reveal that student mothers encounter difficulties in handling the heightened responsibilities of having a baby as they juggle the demands of education and childcare (Ngum Chi Watts et al., 2015). Similarly, research from various African countries indicates that student mothers encounter challenges that can significantly affect their educational experiences. For example, in Namibia, a study by Iita (2021) revealed that student mothers faced issues such as teasing and bullying from other learners, as well as missing classes and examinations due to the demands of motherhood; meanwhile, those in Kenya struggle with lack of concentration, insufficient professional counselling, stigma, and discrimination (Okeyo, 2016).

The mentioned studies from different regions globally emphasise the importance of understanding student mothers' responsibilities while managing the two roles, and the challenges

they face in various cultural contexts have become increasingly relevant. However, there remains a need for context-specific research that considers the socio-cultural and economic factors unique to different settings.

### **Experience in Tanzania**

In the past, adolescent pregnancy in Tanzania resulted in permanent exclusion from formal education, reflecting cultural expectations that viewed motherhood as incompatible with schooling (MoEVT, 2008). However, with the introduction of the 2021 re-admission circular, a significant policy change permits young mothers to return to school (MoEST, 2021). Nevertheless, student mothers now contend with the dual responsibilities of academics and parenting. Tanzania's patriarchal society maintains traditional gender roles, expecting women to oversee caregiving and household duties (UNDP Tanzania, 2022). These obligations heighten the pressures faced by student mothers, especially in communities where early marriage is prevalent and motherhood is deemed a rite of passage (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). Research indicates that student mothers often juggle education, domestic chores, and family business responsibilities, frequently under financial stress (Maluli & Bali, 2014).

Additionally, some families discourage returning to school, perceiving it as threatening maternal duties (Sik, 2015). In rural and semi-urban regions, stigma and coercion into marriage or living with the father's family further hinder their educational pursuits (Kapinga & Hyera, 2015; Sik, 2015). Challenges such as poverty, early pregnancies, and insufficient reproductive education exacerbate these issues (UNFPA, 2022). While some student mothers are reintegrated into formal education, many are redirected to the Institute of Adult Education, raising equity concerns. The re-admission policy lacks precise support mechanisms, such as childcare or assistance with educational costs unrelated to fees (Mwakililo et al., 2025), leading some to seek informal work for themselves and their children. Given these socio-cultural and economic dynamics, this study investigates student mothers' responsibilities and challenges in balancing their dual roles within Tanzania's secondary schools.

### **Literature Review**

Parsons (1971) recognised that socially assigned roles require students and parents to fulfil specific duties. However, student mothers face balancing their care responsibilities with academic obligations, influenced by family support, school policies, resilience, and time management (Govender et al., 2020). Across the globe, student mothers have varying experiences. For instance, in the Philippines, Arboneda et al. (2016) noted that young mothers often take on responsibilities independently and devise their coping mechanisms. Ramirez et al. (2021) highlighted their experiences with discrimination, absenteeism, and limited institutional support. In South Africa, Govender et al. (2020) and Naidoo et al. (2019) pointed out the academic pressures on students and the insufficient assistance teenage mothers receive, especially in impoverished areas. Similar challenges are reported in Namibia, where Dhaka and Musese (2019) emphasised the emotional and safety needs of learner-mothers' children. Iita (2021) found that issues like bullying, missed classes, and difficulty concentrating are common among student mothers in the Omuthiya circuit. Kim and Smith (2020) noted that such experiences differ based on socio-cultural and individual contexts.

In Tanzania, while anecdotal evidence (Mwananchi, 2022; Daily News, 2023) indicates that student mothers struggle to juggle their educational and parenting roles, empirical research is still

limited. Media reports outline obstacles like lengthy commutes, unsafe childcare, and financial difficulties. For instance, during a 2022 World Bank visit to Morogoro, student mothers voiced a need for hostels to alleviate their challenges (Mwananchi, July 14, 2022). Similarly, the Daily News (Nov. 11, 2023) reported dropout cases due to poverty and insufficient family support, noting that some mothers had to work or attend school alongside their children. These narratives highlight the urgent need to study the real-life experiences of student mothers in Tanzania, especially in light of the 2021 re-admission policy. This research aims to fill that gap by examining the responsibilities and challenges faced by student mothers in secondary education.

Meanwhile, research focuses mainly on higher education institutions. For instance, Matiba and Kisanga's (2021) qualitative study found that student mothers in higher learning institutions face challenges like accommodation problems, finding and dealing with babysitters, balancing time for studies and parenting, and financial constraints. Moreover, Sangawe (2020) reported that student mothers in higher learning institutions are faced with challenges like poor attendance of lectures and seminars, difficulties in child care, maternal stress and anxiety, financial constraints, and a shortage of family support. However, it is not clear whether student mothers in secondary schools fulfil the same responsibilities and face the same challenges or not because the situation of student mothers in higher learning institutions is quite different from that of student mothers in secondary schools, leaving a gap in understanding how secondary school-level student mothers experience managing their two roles.

### **Research gap**

Although adolescent motherhood is acknowledged as a significant barrier to educational achievement, there is a scarcity of empirical research investigating the specific experiences of student mothers in Tanzania's secondary schools. While anecdotal records from media outlets like newspapers, television, and social media often shed light on student mothers' difficulties in managing their dual responsibilities, systematic, evidence-based studies documenting and analysing these experiences within the Tanzanian context are notably lacking. Local media reports frequently highlight adolescent mothers' obstacles in returning to school, citing factors such as absenteeism, stigma, and role conflict (Mwalongo, 2023; Mangeli et al., 2019). For example, in *the Daily News*, Mwalongo (2023) discusses the challenges teenage mothers face in Mbeya City, who, despite the government's re-entry policy, struggle with extreme poverty and insufficient family support. This article showcases individual stories, such as Grace Jonas, who was compelled to drop out of school due to prohibitive transport costs and inadequate familial support. Similarly, Loshilaa (2022), in *Mwananchi Newspaper*, highlights the challenges student mothers in Kilosa, Morogoro, face, underscoring the urgent need for enhanced support systems to promote their educational reintegration. Nonetheless, these narratives remain largely informal and lack the thorough, contextual analysis for informing policy and practice.

Various studies have concentrated on the experiences of girls who drop out due to pregnancy, the involvement of stakeholders in supporting teenage mothers' reintegration into secondary schools, and the perspectives of teachers and students regarding re-entry programs (Ngaza & Mwila, 2022; Ngonyani, 2022), research specifically addressing the unique experiences of student mothers in Tanzania's secondary schools remain limited. Studies on this topic have primarily examined student mothers in higher education institutions (Sangawe, 2020; Matiba & Kisanga, 2021). This focus results in the secondary school context receiving insufficient attention, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of how student mothers navigate their dual roles. This

study goes beyond anecdotal evidence by offering qualitative data from focus group discussions with student mothers, aiming to illuminate the complexities of their experiences upon returning to school. This paper strives to address this gap by exploring secondary school student mothers' responsibilities in their daily lives and the challenges they encounter as they balance motherhood with schooling, thereby contributing new insights to the field.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

This study is grounded in the Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT), introduced by Richard Lazarus in 1991. This theory provides a thorough framework for understanding how individuals perceive and react to stress by considering their cognitive assessments, emotional processes, motivational states, and relational contexts. It suggests that coping is influenced by how individuals assess their situations and their perceived capacity to handle them using available resources and support systems. CMRT is particularly relevant for this research, which investigates the experiences of adolescent student mothers in Tanzanian secondary schools, focusing on their responsibilities and the challenges they encounter. These young mothers consistently evaluate their circumstances at school and home through the lenses of primary and secondary appraisal, as defined by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984. In the primary appraisal stage, student mothers determine whether the challenges they face, whether academic, maternal, social, or economic, represent a threat, challenge, or loss to their well-being. In the secondary appraisal stage, they assess whether they possess the resources needed for coping, such as social support, financial stability, or emotional resilience, to address these challenges.

Compared to other motivational and behavioural theories like the Self- Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), or Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), CMRT provides a detailed understanding that incorporates the emotional and relational dimensions of individual experiences. Since the combined roles of parenting and education are emotionally demanding and often impacted by societal expectations and stigma, CMRT serves as a more contextually relevant theoretical framework. By utilising CMRT, this study identifies student mothers' visible responsibilities and challenges. It explores the personal meanings they attribute to these experiences, enabling an interpretation of how they navigate their roles amid the constraints of their social and educational contexts.

### **Research Methods**

#### **Research design**

This research implemented an embedded single-case study design, focusing on student mothers as the primary case, while secondary schools in various districts served as the units of analysis. A single-case study emphasises a distinct, bounded system, in this case, the lived experiences of student mothers, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the various sub-units within that system (Yin, 2014). The five chosen secondary schools from distinct districts represented these embedded analysis units, permitting the researcher to explore the phenomenon across different contexts while preserving the cohesion of the central case.

This design is particularly suitable when the researcher seeks a holistic understanding of contextual insights while examining differences among sites or groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It facilitated a nuanced understanding of how school environments impacted student mothers' responsibilities and challenges without diluting the essence of the main case under investigation.

The embedded design also allowed for the examination of patterns both within and between the selected schools, enriching the findings and enhancing their applicability. The CMRT (Lazarus, 1991) guided this decision by underscoring individual cognitive appraisals within social and institutional frameworks. By concentrating on student mothers across several schools, the study highlighted variations in how diverse educational settings affect their academic, parental, and socioeconomic duties and the obstacles they face. The CMRT (Lazarus, 1991) further informed this choice by stressing the personal assessment of stressors, making it crucial to encapsulate the lived experiences of student mothers through an interpretivist lens.

The researchers considered student mothers to be a case because they represent a unique student population with multiple roles. Hence, they are a vulnerable group within the education system who may be facing myriad challenges that can negatively impact their academic success, unlike adolescent school girls who are not parents and who are not students in secondary schools. Due to a limitation of the design in generalising findings to a larger population (Denscombe, 2014; Yin, 2014), the study's results will be specific to the case of student mothers being studied, not representative of the general population of student mothers in secondary schools. However, the aim was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon rather than generalising results (Yin, 2014).

### **Area of the study**

This study was conducted in the Mbeya region due to a reasonable number of registered student mothers in secondary schools, compared to other regions in Tanzania (Institute of Adult Education, 2024). As indicated in Table 1 in the subsequent pages, the number of adolescent girls, including student mothers who have re-joined schools in the Mbeya region, exceeds that of those from other regions of mainland Tanzania. The presence of a reasonable number of student mothers in the Mbeya region offered a rich and diverse pool of potential participants. The higher prevalence of student mothers in Mbeya gave the researchers a unique opportunity to garner a comprehensive understanding of secondary school students' experiences and coping strategies from relevant participants.

The researchers recognise that the needs of secondary school student mothers in the context of Tanzania might not be different, but decided to opt for Mbeya region, anticipating that if the number of re-admitted student girls, including student mothers, is high, then the understanding and readiness of the society in supporting student mothers to accomplish their two roles and reach their educational goals might be positive. Additionally, the stigma and discrimination against student mothers might be low, unlike in regions where the population of re-admitted secondary school student mothers is low; probably, there is still low or no awareness and support for student mothers. In this regard, going to Mbeya region provides the researchers and other communities with new insight to learn about why there are many student mothers in the region.

**Table 1:** Student mothers who rejoined school after pregnancy-related dropout in various regions of Tanzania as of 2022

Region	Districts	Re-admitted Adolescent girls	Re-admitted Student Mothers	Region	Districts	Re-admitted Adolescent girls	Student Mothers
Mwanza	Sengerema	13	01	Mara	Musoma Mc	37	00
	Buchosa	41	20		Rorya	33	01
	Ilemela	73	00		Bunda DC	10	07
	Nyamagama	32	07		Bunda TC	25	01
	Magu	30	02		Tarime TC	25	00
	Misungwi	31	01		Musoma	19	00
	Ukerewe	12	02		Sengerema	30	01
	Kwimba	09	02				
Total		241	35			179	10
Manyara	Babati DC	11	01	Dar es Salaam	Kinondoni	56	21
	Babati TC	43	03		Ilala	47	07
	Hanang	45	02		Ubungo	36	17
	Mbulu DC	67	03		Temeke	22	04
	Mbulu TC	50	07		Kigamboni	19	05
Total		216	16			180	54
Iringa	Iringa MC	80	00	Simiyu	Busega DC	34	33
	Kilolo	36	03		Itilima DC	32	01
	Iringa DC	16	00		Bariadi TC	27	00
	Mufindi	30	03		Maswa DC	10	00
	Mafinga	26	00		Bariadi	21	00
Total		188	06			124	34
Pwani	Mkuranga	20	03	Mbeya	Busokelo	15	01
	Bagamoyo	27	02		Kyela	35	02
	Rufiji	05	00		Mbarali	67	00
	Chalinze	44	02		Mbeya DC	91	11
	Kibaha-Tumbi	22	01		Mbeya TC	223	42
	Kibaha DC	24	04		Rungwe	41	02
Total		142	12			472	58
Kigoma	Kigoma MC	30	00	Morogoro	Morogoro	26	18
	Uvinza	62	04		Kilosa	28	02
	Kasulu	23	00		Kilombero	37	04
	Kibondo	18	00		Gairo	31	03
	Kakonko	24	00				
Total		157	04			122	27
Ruvuma	Tunduru	17	05	Dodoma	Dodoma CC	50	06
	Namtumbo	28	03		Chamwilo	44	04
	Nyasa	25	04		Mpwapwa	04	04
	Songea MC	70	06		Chemba	24	03
Total		140	18			122	17

**Source:** Institute of Adult Education (2022)

*Note:* Table 1 presents enrollment figures for adolescent mothers re-admitted into secondary schools and Alternative Education Pathway (AEP) centres in 2022. The researchers purposively selected regions based on having more than 120 re-admitted girls, making them appropriate for exploring the objectives of the study.

### Limitations of the study

The study on secondary school student mothers in Tanzania has limitations, including purposive sampling and social desirability bias. The sample may not represent the wider population, but the

aim was to produce context-rich insights. The study also found that some participants were influenced by group dynamics, leading to responses aligning with societal expectations. Despite these limitations, the study contributed to existing knowledge on the responsibilities and challenges faced by secondary school student mothers.

## Population and sampling

### *Selection of secondary schools*

With the help of the Regional Educational Officer (REO), the researchers identified nine schools that have registered a reasonable number of student mothers in the selected districts (Mbeya CC, Mbeya DC, and Rungwe) (see Table 3 in the subsequent pages). In this study, the REO played a pivotal role in facilitating access to selected secondary schools that have registered many adolescent student mothers. The REO, responsible for overseeing education within the region, was approached for assistance due to their comprehensive knowledge of school distribution and the specific educational needs of student mothers. The REO was instrumental in identifying suitable schools from different districts of the Mbeya region, as they possess the authority and insight to guide researchers to institutions that meet the study's inclusion criteria.

The schools included Sinda Secondary School, Nzondahaki Secondary School, Iyunga Secondary School, Usongwe Secondary School, Legico Secondary School, Uyole Secondary School, Kiwira Secondary School, Lufingo Secondary School, and Maziwa Secondary School. Then, the researchers had to purposively sample five schools with a reasonable number of registered student mothers. In this regard, the researchers had to select Iyunga Secondary School, Uyole Secondary School, Sinda Secondary School, Nzondahaki Secondary School, and Usongwe Secondary School. According to Bryman (2016), Purposive sampling was used to select five (5) secondary schools due to their unique features explained in the subsequent text. The five (5) schools were chosen because they had a reasonable number of registered student mothers in the Mbeya region (see Table 3). In this regard, other schools were not selected because some had very few student mothers. For example, Lufingo secondary school had only one (1) student mother, while Kiwira and Ihahi secondary schools had student mothers who did not meet the criteria. For example, Kiwira had three (3) Ihahi had four (4) student mothers who had no qualifications or interests.

**Table 2:** Registered student mothers in different schools in Mbeya region by number, district

S/N	Name of school	Registered Student Mothers	District
1	Nzondahaki open-school	08	Mbeya CC
2	Lufingo Secondary School	01	Rungwe DC
3	Kyela secondary	02	Kyela
4	Iyunga secondary	08	Mbeya CC
5	Kiwira secondary	03	Rungwe
6	Legico secondary	05	Mbeya CC
7	Ihahi secondary	01	Mbarali
8	Mbarali secondary	00	Mbarali
9	Sinda secondary	10	Mbeya CC
10	Maziwa secondary	00	Mbeya CC
11	Uyole secondary	09	Mbeya CC
12	Usongwe Secondary School	11	Mbeya DC
Total		58	

**Source:** Mbeya Regional Education Office (2023)

**Selection of student mothers**

The study purposively selected 20 student mothers aged 15-19 who experienced pregnancy and returned to school after giving birth, with at least one (1) year of motherhood and schooling experience, and were ready to share their experiences. The participants were selected from schools with a reasonable number of registered student mothers, with assistance from the Regional Educational Officer's office in the Mbeya region. In this regard, the researchers purposively selected 7 student mothers from Sinde secondary school, 4 from Usongwe secondary school, 4 from Uyole secondary school, and 5 from Iyunga secondary school. Student mothers were selected based on being a student mother for atleast one year or more, and being willing to share information and experiences related to motherhood and schooling. Data in Table 3 indicates different information about the participants' demographic characteristics:

**Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

S/N	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20
Age	17	18	19	17	16	17	19	19	17	17	16	16	17	15	16	16	17	19	19	17
Married	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Children	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Age of Child	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	2	1
Family support	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Planned pregnancy?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

Table 3 presents the demographic characteristics of the 20 student mothers who participated in this study. The data include participants' age range, marital status, number of children, age of a child (children), whether pregnancy was planned, and types of family support received. These characteristics provide important context for understanding their lived experiences in managing motherhood and schooling.

**Data collection instruments and trustworthiness**

The study employed open-ended questionnaires (OEQs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) as guided by the nature of the study, ensuring an in-depth exploration of how student mothers cognitively appraise their responsibilities and the challenges they face within their social settings. Open-ended questionnaires were used to give participants the freedom to reflect privately and provide detailed responses to sensitive issues such as family support, stigma, or emotional well-being. This method was particularly important in respecting participant comfort and confidentiality, especially for those who might be hesitant to speak openly in a group setting. The open-ended questionnaires were distributed to student mothers and were submitted on the agreed day for focus group discussions. This method was particularly important in respecting participant comfort and confidentiality, especially for those who might be hesitant to speak openly in a group setting.

On the other hand, focus groups allowed for interactive dialogue among student mothers, facilitating the emergence of shared experiences, contrasting views, and group-based coping strategies. FGDs also created a supportive environment where participants could build on each other's responses, enriching the data through collective reflection. Each discussion session took place in the school environment and lasted for 60 to 120 minutes. Trustworthiness is considered a general quality picture in any qualitative study (Connelly, 2016). The researchers ensured the

trustworthiness of the data through four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman, 2016).

### **Ethical issues and consideration**

As part of seeking their consent, all the student mothers were informed about the study's nature, purpose, and benefits in advance. Moreover, participants were asked for verbal consent to participate in the study. Each session began with an audio recording of verbal agreement, and the procedure was recorded in field notes. According to qualitative research ethics, this approach is a legitimate and appropriate way to obtain consent, particularly when working with vulnerable or marginalised groups (WHO, 2011). In this study, student mothers are considered a vulnerable and marginalized group due to the intersecting challenges they face, including stigma, social exclusion, and limited access to institutional support. These conditions often hinder their ability to balance motherhood and schooling, placing them at higher risk of dropout, poor academic performance, and emotional distress (UNESCO, 2018). Additionally, verbal consent also complies with the University of Oxford's ethical guidelines, which provide that when written evidence is difficult or could discourage truthful involvement, oral consent should be audio recorded (University of Oxford, 2021). Furthermore, participants were made aware of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any moment without suffering consequences. However, no participant withdrew from the study at any stage of the research process. Additionally, to address the ethical impact, the researchers asked for permission from the heads of schools, and for student mothers who were under 18, informed consent was obtained from the parents to tell them and ask for their permission to allow their children to participate in the research by filling out a consent form. In this study, 14 student mothers were under 18 (see table 3)

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously, with focus group data transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis. Nvivo 12 software assisted in coding, categorising, and identifying themes and patterns in the dataset, making a systematic and rigorous approach to data analysis. The use of NVivo 12 software in this study was informed by the need to manage and analyze a substantial volume of qualitative data generated through open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions with student mothers. Given the study's interpretivist orientation, which values rich, contextualized narratives, NVivo 12 provided an efficient and systematic way to organize, code, and interpret the data. The software enabled the researcher to store diverse data sets in one central location, apply consistent coding schemes, and identify recurring patterns and themes across participants' responses. Additionally, NVivo's visualization tools, such as word clouds and node trees, supported the development of thematic categories and strengthened the transparency and credibility of the analysis process. Overall, the use of NVivo enhanced the rigour of the study and allowed for a more understanding of student mothers' experiences, in line with best practices in qualitative research (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The researchers adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2022) proposed six steps for thematic analysis to enhance data credibility and reliability because of its flexibility when examining data for emerging topics or ideas relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2016).

Thematic analysis was conducted, guided by Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory (CMRT) (Lazarus, 1991) principles, which offers a useful lens for understanding how individuals interpret and respond to demanding life situations. In relation to the study's objectives, CMRT informed

the analysis of how student mothers appraised their caregiving and academic responsibilities (primary appraisal) and how they evaluated their capacity to manage these roles amid challenges such as stigma, limited support, and institutional constraints (secondary appraisal). The analysis also explored motivational and relational influences, highlighting how student mothers navigated their dual roles in response to school policies and socio-cultural expectations.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study based on data collected through open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions with student mothers. The analysis was guided by the study's two objectives: to explore the responsibilities student mothers perform while pursuing secondary education, and to examine the challenges they encounter in balancing motherhood and schooling. Thematic analysis, informed by Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory (CMRT), enabled the identification of recurring patterns and meanings within participants' narratives. The findings are organised into thematic categories, each supported by illustrative quotes to capture the lived experiences and contextual realities of student mothers in the selected schools.

#### **Responsibilities performed by student mothers as they manage motherhood and schooling**

According to field research, student mothers in Tanzanian secondary schools shoulder a variety of tasks in addition to parenthood and education. These include spousal responsibilities in convenient marriages, entrepreneurial pursuits, and other household and social commitments. The many roles student mothers play in their everyday lives emphasise the complexity of their experiences and the various expectations placed on them as presented on the subsequent pages:

##### ***Academic responsibilities***

Student mothers in Tanzanian secondary schools are expected to attend classes, complete homework, be involved in academic group discussions and personal studies while at school, and prepare for examinations while managing other duties. One of the student's mothers mentioned:

...although there are a lot of obstacles at home, I make sure that I do not miss classes. It is important to me since it assists me in understanding the material and keeping up with the class. Attending class is not enough; you also need to actively participate in discussions, take notes, and engage with the material. (S2, School A)

The quotation indicates that despite student mothers' challenges in managing their schedules, they continue to attend classes to interact with their teachers and classmates to grasp the subject matter. The study findings emphasise that despite the significant obstacles student mothers face in managing their schedules, they persist in attending classes, engaging with teachers, and collaborating with classmates to meet their academic requirements.

These findings can be interpreted through Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT), which highlights the importance of cognitive appraisals in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to stressors. For student mothers, their academic obligations are likely viewed as both challenges and motivations, influencing how they navigate and balance their dual roles. CMRT suggests that when individuals encounter stressors, they evaluate whether these are threats or challenges, and this evaluation informs their emotional and behavioural responses (Lazarus, 1991). For student mothers, their academic responsibilities may be viewed as threatening due to the time and energy required to juggle both roles, resulting in feelings of stress or overwhelm. Yet, these responsibilities can also serve as motivational drivers, as achieving their education is

crucial for securing a brighter future for themselves and their children. This dual appraisal perceiving both threat and motivation is consistent with the findings of Buchanan (2018) and Dhaka and Musese (2019), who, at different times, observed that while student mothers experience heightened stress due to their dual roles, they remain dedicated to their academic pursuits, fuelled by a strong sense of purpose. This assessment of their academic responsibilities can provoke various emotional responses, ranging from frustration with the struggle to balance their duties to optimism derived from the aspiration for educational advancement.

### ***Parental responsibilities***

Most student mothers reported experiencing an overloaded daily routine encompassing a range of tasks related to their motherhood, including childcare responsibilities of feeding, bathing, dressing, and taking a child to the monthly clinic or hospital when they were sick. For example, the following quotes substantiate this claim:

My day starts early in the morning when my child wakes up. From that moment, my focus shifted entirely to caring for her needs. I have to attend to her feeding, changing local nappies, and ensuring that my child is safe and comfortable throughout the day. It is a constant act between providing care for my child and trying to manage my tasks. I try to find moments when the child is asleep or occupied with toys to quickly attend to household chores like cleaning, cooking, and laundry. (S4)

This quote implies that the majority of student mothers are the ones who take full primary responsibility for taking care of their children's well-being and safety in all conditions and circumstances. The content of the quote reveals that managing these tasks necessitates strong time management, organisation, and resilience.

The participants reported bearing the primary responsibility for taking care of and ensuring the well-being of their children while also pursuing their education in the school environment. Other student mothers experienced unique difficulties bringing their children to school. It required them to integrate childcare into their daily school schedule, balancing their responsibilities as students and mothers in the same school environment. These responsibilities included ensuring their children's well-being and safety, changing local nappies, and engaging them in activities. A student's mother said:

I have to come to school with my child because I have no one to assist in babysitting her at home. Every morning, I pack my bag to ensure that the child has all he requires for the day, including food and clothing for changing while we are at school. In break times, I take my time to feed him and make sure I change his nappies to make her comfortable and not disturb me in class sessions. Although it takes a lot of work, it is essential for both his well-being and mine to attend classes; otherwise, I will always have to stay home. (S13)

The findings suggest that many student mothers assume full primary responsibility for the care and well-being of their children, often navigating various challenges to fulfil these duties. As the quote indicates, managing these responsibilities requires exceptional time management, organisation, and resilience. In cases where no alternative childcare support is available, student mothers may need to take their children to school, balancing their parental duties with academic demands. This claim reflects a broader finding that student mothers face substantial parental responsibilities, including meeting their children's needs while managing school obligations

(Arboneda et al., 2016). It thus contrasts with non-parenting students, who do not bear these caregiving duties.

From the Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT) perspective, this finding underscores the cognitive appraisals student mothers make in response to their roles. These appraisals often involve evaluating the stressors (parenting and schooling) and deciding how to manage the situation based on perceived control, available resources, and personal motivations. The theory suggests that these cognitive evaluations influence how student mothers navigate their dual roles, and their ability to adapt to or cope with these challenges is shaped by their perception of these responsibilities as manageable or overwhelming. When caregiving demands intensify, it can trigger emotional and motivational responses that guide how they balance their academic and parental roles.

As Aluoch et al. (2019) highlighted, the added burden of parental duties can elevate stress levels and create significant obstacles to academic performance. This quote can be understood through the lens of CMRT as an example of how student mothers' motivation to succeed academically may be influenced by the perceived feasibility of managing both responsibilities. The socio-cultural context often imposes greater expectations on women to perform caregiving roles, exacerbating these challenges and adding another layer of complexity to how student mothers assess and adapt to their situation.

### ***Personal income-generating responsibilities***

Results indicated that the majority of student mothers involved themselves in income-generating ventures like doing laundry jobs in other people's homes during weekends and cleaning dishes in local restaurants after school hours, as substantiated in the following quote:

I do not even get the time to study at home because I also have to manage my small business of selling bites very well, which I carry with me to school and sell to my fellow students. Therefore, I have to buy them in the evening after getting home and prepare them very early in the morning. I have to do all these obligations while also not affecting my childcare routines and academic-related matters. It is not easy, and I normally go to sleep very late while very tired, but I don't have an option because I have no one to assist me with whatever concerns me, my child, and my school matters. (S3)

This quote indicates student mothers' financial difficulties, emphasising the lack of external financial support. In response to this dilemma, most chose small businesses as a solution.

Other student mothers reported selling bites and other small goods like sweets, coconut-peanut candy, and coloured baobab seeds to their fellow students within the school settings during break times. They did these activities to support themselves financially and generate additional income for childcare. The following quote justifies:

It has been part of my daily routine when coming to school; I make sure that I carry my snacks to sell to my fellows during break time or even in class when the teacher is not around. This assists me in earning some money to cover childcare expenses and some of my school expenses, like issues of transport and stationery. (S11)

The voice of the student mother highlights that many student mothers engage in income-generating activities, such as selling small goods around the school environment or taking part-

time jobs washing dishes in local restaurants after school. These activities are undertaken to support their families, especially in the face of limited familial support. They also call forth Govender et al.'s (2020) work, which underscores the significant role that income-generating activities play in the lives of student mothers. Unlike their peers who may rely on family support or scholarships, student mothers experience the added pressure of balancing academic demands with financial responsibilities. This situation contributes to the distinctiveness of their experiences.

The strain of balancing academic work with income-generating tasks can lead to increased stress, as noted by Aluoch et al. (2019), and aligns with CMRT's view that coping mechanisms are influenced by how individuals evaluate the stressors they face and their perceived control over these situations. While these entrepreneurial efforts present challenges, they also equip student mothers with valuable life skills, such as time management, resilience, and problem-solving, which enhance their ability to cope with the demands of schooling and parenting. This claim contrasts with the experiences of other students who may not face these financial pressures, suggesting that student mothers' coping strategies are shaped by their unique context.

### ***Marital obligations inconvenience marriages***

For student mothers, especially those who had been chased out of their parental homes owing to pregnancy while in school, entering into convenience marriages became an option to obtain assured shelter, financial assistance, and social stability. However, this decision came with more responsibilities. Student mothers reported being responsible for not only their maternal duties but also the tasks and responsibilities that spouses are supposed to fulfil in their convenience marriages, as substantiated:

I have been staying with the father of my child since I got pregnant. I always do all the house chores and other responsibilities that require a wife.... initially, I was staying with my aunt, but she expelled me from home after identifying that I was suspended from school due to pregnancy. It is very tiresome to fulfil all the obligations at home and school. (S12)

The findings suggest that student mothers in convenience marriages face additional responsibilities, including household chores, caring for their child and husband, and managing academic duties (MoEVT, 2008). These marital obligations create significant stress compared to non-married students, who focus solely on their education. Maluli and Bali (2014) highlight similar challenges, noting that married students struggle to balance home life and studies.

This experience contrasts sharply with non-married students, who do not have additional home responsibilities and, therefore, can focus more fully on their academic pursuits. This finding aligns with Maluli and Bali (2014), who argue that married students face notable academic challenges due to the additional burden of household duties, which can detract from their academic engagement. From the Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT) perspective, the cognitive appraisals made by student mothers are key to understanding how they manage their marital obligations alongside academic responsibilities. These student mothers likely evaluate their marital roles as stressors that require coping strategies, such as time management and role prioritisation.

The CMRT emphasises that when individuals perceive a stressor, such as marital obligations, as exceeding their capacity to manage, they experience greater emotional and psychological strain. In this context, the motivation to fulfil familial and academic duties may drive student mothers to remain in these marriages despite the stress and conflict this may cause in their educational lives. However, this added stress can also hinder their academic performance, as the cognitive and emotional resources needed to manage multiple roles may be depleted. Furthermore, managing marital obligations in convenience marriages involves relational processes as student mothers navigate their relationships with their spouses and others. The social and relational dynamics in convenience marriages can serve as both sources of support and stress. If these relationships lack support, they may exacerbate student mothers' challenges, influencing their ability to manage their academic and marital responsibilities.

### **Challenges faced by student mothers in managing motherhood and schooling**

This section presents findings related to the challenges faced by student mothers in managing the dual demands of parenting and schooling. Drawing from their lived experiences, participants described a range of personal, social, and institutional challenges that hindered their ability to manage motherhood concurrent with schooling. The analysis was guided by CMRT, which provided insight into how student mothers appraised these challenges and the motivational and relational dimensions that shaped their appraisal process. The themes presented highlight the complexity of navigating motherhood within an educational setting, where stigma, limited support, and conflicting responsibilities often intersect.

#### ***Absenteeism***

Participants reported often missing school and classes because they had other competing needs, such as the baby, that required them to stay out of school. Most student mothers missed classes when a child was unwell and needed immediate medical attention. Others explained that at other times, there might have been schedules that conflicted between their class timings and different family responsibilities. In contrast, others reported that sometimes they do not attend school due to tiredness from the overloaded daily routines caused by the dual roles. The following quotations support this claim:

As a student mother, missing classes due to my child's sickness is a constant concern. When my child falls ill, I prioritise her health and well-being above all else. It is disheartening to see my classmates attending school while I am at home, taking care of my sick child. I understand the importance of attending classes, but as a mother, I cannot compromise on providing the necessary care and attention when my child needs it the most. (S2)

Student mothers frequently encounter absenteeism due to conflicting responsibilities between addressing their children's needs and fulfilling academic demands. As highlighted in the findings, student mothers often miss school to care for sick children or attend medical appointments, with childcare taking precedence over academic obligations. This pattern of absenteeism, more pronounced among student mothers than their non-parenting peers, severely disrupts their educational progress. The impact of absenteeism on student mothers' learning aligns with findings by Kim and Smith (2020), who noted that the additional caregiving duties of student mothers often compromise academic attendance. This issue, as Lita (2021) notes,

exacerbates learning gaps and contributes to diminished academic performance, creating a cycle that hinders their ability to pursue their education.

Moreover, the findings resonate with Adofo's (2013) observation that 47.5% of student mothers struggle to attend classes regularly due to inconvenient scheduling and other caregiving responsibilities. Absenteeism, therefore, not only leads to academic underachievement but also heightens frustration as student mothers attempt to balance their educational trajectory with their domestic responsibilities (Bukhosini, 2019).

The CMRT is relevant here, as student mothers' cognitive appraisals regarding their roles influence how they prioritise caregiving over academics. These constant assessments of their duties as mothers lead to the perception of absenteeism as an unavoidable aspect of their dual roles. Coping, in this case, may involve the acceptance of missed classes as a necessary trade-off, reflecting the stressors that the theory suggests influence adaptive responses to role conflict (Lazarus, 1991). Furthermore, as noted by Nkwemu (2016) and Dhaka and Musese (2019), the socioeconomic factors reveal that poverty also pressures student mothers to choose income-generating activities over school attendance, further compounding the challenges of balancing motherhood and schooling.

### ***Role conflict***

The majority of student mothers found conflicts between their role as mothers and their role as students when their children's demands for time and attention distracted them from the needs of their studies. This conflict stemmed from the inherent disparities in the demands of these roles.

My academic commitments sometimes clash with my responsibilities as a mother. For instance, when exams are approaching, giving my children the attention they need becomes difficult. On the other hand, when my child needs extra support or attention during sickness, I often compromise my study time. (S15)

This narration indicates that student mothers experience significant role conflict due to the competing demands of motherhood and academics. Balancing multiple responsibilities often leads to feeling overwhelmed, which may cause them to sometimes prioritise one role over another. Role conflict arises when student mothers struggle to manage their educational and parenting responsibilities effectively, often resulting in stress and reduced performance in academic tasks (Mangeli et al., 2019). Setwin et al. (2019) further argue that the conflicting demands of parenthood, academic work, and other obligations generate considerable stress for student mothers, a challenge not typically faced by their non-parenting peers.

This conclusion aligns with earlier research by Adangabe (2020) and Mutakatala et al. (2023), which found that student mothers often deal with role conflict due to the dual pressures of parenting and education. The socio-cultural expectations on student mothers to fulfil both academic and domestic roles exacerbate the challenges they encounter in managing their responsibilities. These challenges exemplify Parsons' (1971) concept of role conflict, where individuals with multiple obligations experience heightened stress due to their struggle to meet all demands adequately.

The Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT) provides insight into how student mothers appraise their roles cognitively. As they balance their dual responsibilities, the emotional burden of feeling overwhelmed might lead them to regard certain academic tasks as less important than their maternal obligations. This cognitive evaluation can result in adaptive behaviours that, while necessary, may not consistently support academic achievement. The theory posits that this stress response stems from a perceived imbalance between demands and available resources, influencing their coping strategies and navigating their dual roles.

### ***Interrupted concentration in class***

It was revealed that the daily mental balancing act between childcare responsibilities and academic obligations hindered student mothers' ability to engage in the learning process fully. Other reasons included deprived sleep patterns and fatigue due to long distances to school and leaving their children in unsafe home environments. The following statements substantiate this theme:

It is very difficult to afford to sleep accordingly on most nights. Try to imagine taking care of the child, studying, and managing house chores, but you may find there is very little time to get enough sleep. As a student, it affects my concentration in class. I find myself feeling sleepy during class hours and struggle to stay alert. Some teachers may think I don't want to pay attention, but a lack of sleep at night makes it challenging to engage in studies. (S7)

This quote highlights that student mothers frequently experience class interruptions due to the immense pressure of juggling school, childcare, and household duties. Insufficient rest and self-care result in cognitive and emotional exhaustion, which undermines their ability to focus in class. This observation aligns with Maluli and Bali (2014), who remarked that the mental burden of juggling multiple roles disrupts academic concentration. In some instances, student mothers bring their children to class, which further impacts both their concentration and that of their classmates. These interruptions contrast with the experiences of non-parenting students, who do not encounter similar obstacles.

Alhassan et al. (2023) affirm that distractions from external responsibilities like childcare often hinder students' focus during lessons. Likewise, Mutakatala et al. (2023) and Ntinda et al. (2016) found that student mothers face concentration challenges due to their extensive responsibilities and childcare-related distractions. This evidence supports the notion that multitasking can adversely affect academic performance.

Gatbonton (2021) recommends establishing on-campus childcare facilities for student mothers, which could significantly enhance their class concentration. Providing this support could mitigate interruptions and improve these mothers' academic experiences and outcomes. From a CMRT perspective, the absence of adequate support systems may lead to perceptions of insufficient resources to meet academic demands, heightening stress and impairing focus. This ongoing struggle illustrates the adaptation required in their dual roles, which could be eased by measures that lessen the need for student mothers to manage these responsibilities in a classroom environment.

### ***Lack of guidance and counselling services***

Guidance and counselling services tailored to student mothers can provide invaluable assistance in time management, stress management, academic planning, and balancing their roles as students and mothers. However, it was evident that there was a lack of dedicated support and tailored guidance specifically designed to address the unique needs and challenges faced by student mothers in all the selected schools. Most student mothers expressed the need for guidance and counselling services to help them navigate the complexities of their two roles.

I wish we had guidance and counselling services specifically tailored to the needs of student mothers. Sometimes, the challenges we face can feel overwhelming, and it would be incredibly helpful to have a dedicated counsellor who understands our unique circumstances. (S18)

The quote suggests a strong necessity for a safe environment with qualified counsellors, where student mothers can freely voice and discuss their fears, uncertainties, and challenges. The absence of guidance and counselling services for these mothers highlights a significant shortcoming in the support systems designed to assist them in managing the intricate balance of academic and personal responsibilities. Many student mothers experience emotional and psychological strains due to their dual roles, and without a professional space to articulate their concerns, these difficulties are further intensified. This assertion aligns with Adangabe (2020), who emphasised that student mothers often do not have adequate support systems to manage the pressures of education and motherhood. The lack of counselling services goes against the re-admission directive, which stresses the necessity of such services for re-admitted students, including student mothers. This deficit hampers their ability to handle both educational and personal hurdles effectively.

Supporting this assertion, Mutakatala et al. (2023) found that 51 out of 79 surveyed participants reported no counselling services available in their institutions. Various studies have indicated a direct link between the absence of counselling services and heightened emotional and academic difficulties experienced by student mothers (Mutakatala et al., 2023; Naidoo et al., 2019). The claim highlights the vital need for such services to bolster student mothers' emotional well-being and academic achievements.

However, this study contrasts with some prior research, including Anibijuwon and Esimai (2020) in Nigeria and Bellamy et al. (2017) in the Caribbean, which reported the availability of counselling services to all students, including student mothers. The discrepancies in service availability can likely be traced back to policy issues, differing educational priorities, budget limitations, and cultural influences that affect the provision and execution of support systems. Additionally, research in Ghana (Abotsi, 2020) found that schools also offered guidance and counselling services to all students, including student mothers. The variability in counselling service availability across different nations can be attributed to differences in educational policies, local priorities, and cultural values, further underscoring the necessity for consistent support frameworks designed to meet the specific requirements of student mothers. From the CMRT perspective, the lack of counselling services could impede student mothers' ability to accurately assess and manage the stressors associated with their academic and personal roles, resulting in heightened emotional distress and reduced academic performance.

### ***Discrimination and stigmatisation***

Results indicated that student mothers were stigmatised within the school, at home, and in the community. These challenges stemmed from the negative stereotypes and judgments associated with young motherhood. Participants noted that they were regarded as children of bad manners and bad examples to others. Other people in the communities have stopped their daughters from being around student mothers and are not cooperating with them in anything, unlike before they became mothers. It was found that some parents consider being around student mothers will pollute their children's behaviours because they consider student mothers to be bad examples. The following excerpts provide supporting evidence:

I had friends who stopped talking to me after they found out that I was pregnant. Their parents have prevented some of them from being around me because I am a mother. They tell their girls I am a bad example and will pollute their behaviour. Even in my family, they call me a disgrace. They make negative assumptions about my future. (S16)

The statements suggest that student mothers often endure social rejection and judgment from friends, peers, and family due to their motherhood. While attending school, they frequently experience significant stigmatisation and rejection, which reflects societal biases against teenage parenthood. This discriminatory treatment is commonly faced by peers, educators, and family, underscoring the prevailing societal attitudes. Research indicates that such stigmatisation can lead to exclusion, reduced social support, and negative perceptions of student mothers (Kakuru, 2022; Dhaka & Musese, 2019). In contrast, non-parenting students generally do not encounter similar societal critiques.

The stigma attached to teenage motherhood further separates student mothers, adversely impacting their mental health and academic success (Kim & Smith, 2020). This study supports the findings of Kakuru (2022) and Dhaka and Musese (2019), who observed that teenage mothers are frequently viewed as social outcasts, having breached societal norms concerning age-appropriate education. Student mothers are sometimes labelled as negative influences or poor role models. For instance, some parents discourage their daughters from spending time with student mothers, concerned about the potential negative impact on their children's behaviour (Mangeli et al., 2019). This societal rejection stems from what Dlamini (2016) refer to as the "discourse of contamination," where the morality of student mothers is perceived as a threat to the moral integrity of others.

The adverse effects of stigmatisation and discrimination reach beyond social rejection, contributing to emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem, which can hinder academic achievement. Zondo (2006) noted that negative perceptions and discriminatory actions in South Africa lead to disengagement from academics, diminishing student mothers' motivation to engage in school activities or seek academic assistance. Similarly, Nkwemu (2016) highlighted that societal biases perpetuate misconceptions regarding student mothers' capabilities, reinforcing stereotypes that undermine their potential. These experiences reveal the profound psychological and academic challenges student mothers face, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to create supportive, non-judgmental environments that improve their educational outcomes and social integration.

### ***Comparative effects of dual roles on the education of student mothers***

Student mothers in secondary schools face multiple challenges in balancing their academic and parenting responsibilities. Academic responsibilities require cognitive engagement, effective time management, and sustained focus, but often result in frequent absences, limited study time, and mental fatigue due to parenting responsibilities, marital obligations, and entrepreneurial commitments. This pressure can lead to decreased participation, falling grades, and dropping out of school.

Parenting responsibilities consume significant time and emotional energy, extending beyond school hours and heightening role conflict. Unlike academic tasks, they require ongoing attention that often surpasses school hours, introducing emotional stress and logistical hurdles. Socio-cultural expectations, such as traditional gender roles emphasising motherhood over education, heighten difficulties. Family members may discourage student mothers from attending school, believing that a mother's primary focus should be on parenting and household duties. Personal factors, such as family support, resilience, and self-determination, significantly influence how student mothers navigate these dual roles. Socio-cultural norms, financial circumstances, and school policies also impact their ability to remain engaged in education. In patriarchal societies, stigma and discrimination can lead to decreased academic involvement and emotional turmoil. Strong social support from family, teachers, and peers helps student mothers manage their dual roles better, while those without experience face more significant challenges.

### **Implications for the Study**

The findings of this study carry theoretical, policy, and practical implications, particularly in understanding how student mothers in secondary schools navigate their dual roles. **Theoretical Implications:** This study extends the Cognitive- Motivational- Relational Theory (CMRT) by demonstrating how student mothers cognitively appraise the demands of their dual roles and the associated stressors. The findings indicate that academic responsibilities, such as attending classes and completing assignments, often conflict with parental duties, including childcare and household tasks. Additionally, negative social perceptions, stigma from peers and teachers, and limited institutional support exacerbate their struggles. CMRT provides a framework to understand how these students respond to their circumstances and the challenges stemming from role conflict and external pressures.

*Policy Implications:* The findings emphasise student mothers' financial burdens, which significantly affect their ability to balance schooling and parental responsibilities. Many struggle to afford learning materials, childcare expenses, and daily necessities, increasing the risk of absenteeism and dropout. Policymakers should consider financial support mechanisms, such as stipends, to alleviate economic hardships and enable student mothers to remain in school. Moreover, the study reveals that most schools visited lack structured support systems, such as counselling and psychosocial services, leaving student mothers without professional help to navigate their academic and personal challenges. A standardised framework for counselling services should be integrated into all schools to ensure equal access to emotional and academic support for student mothers, regardless of their school placement.

*Practical Implications:* Schools must acknowledge the challenges posed by the intersection of academic and parental responsibilities and adopt strategies that support student mothers without

hindering their educational progress. The study underscores the need for school-based daycare facilities and teacher awareness programs to foster a more inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, addressing social discrimination and stigmatisation within schools can help student mothers feel more accepted, ultimately creating a more conducive atmosphere for their learning.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examines the responsibilities and challenges adolescent student mothers face as they pursue secondary education in Tanzania. The findings indicate that these young mothers juggle various roles, balancing their studies with parenting, household duties, marital obligations, and sometimes income-generating activities. These intertwined responsibilities greatly affect their educational experiences and academic outcomes. The dual burden often results in frequent absences, reduced classroom focus, emotional and psychological distress, and compromised academic performance. Additionally, stigma and discrimination in school settings, coupled with insufficient institutional support, worsen these challenges. The conflict between educational and caregiving duties creates ongoing setbacks in their learning progress and restricts student mothers' ability to engage and succeed in their educational pursuits fully. The study highlights the urgent need for specific inclusive policies and support systems, such as psychosocial counselling, financial aid, flexible learning options, and teacher training, to alleviate these issues. Ultimately, the findings advocate for more longitudinal research into the long-term academic and psychosocial impacts of adolescent motherhood in educational contexts and stronger policy frameworks to ensure that motherhood does not impede the right to education.

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### **Competing Interest**

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

### **Data Availability**

The data supporting the results or analyses presented in this paper can be found at the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### **Authors' Contributions**

Ms. Pendo Samson Mwakililo conceptualised the idea, collected the data, interpreted and discussed the findings, and drafted the manuscript. Dr. Suitbert Emil Lyakurwa conceptualised the idea, interpreted the findings, and revised the manuscript. Dr. Chris Mungubariki Mauki conceptualised the idea, interpreted the findings, and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of this manuscript.

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