



Higher Education and Gender Relations: Domiciliary Activities for Mothers Students of Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate the reality of women who became mothers while attending Pedagogy, with emphasis on the challenges they experienced in reconciling their studies with motherhood, as well as the university's attitude towards home-based activities and attendance to these students. The research was carried out through a survey of information in the Academic Secretary of university and recording interviews with a teacher and three women who became mothers while studying Pedagogy. The results indicate that: although women gain space in the academic world, when pregnancy occurs they face difficulties, accumulated with attributions; during the three months of maternity leave, teachers send home activities, but the students consider little time away; despite the challenges faced by the 34 academic mothers, 91.16% of the total gave continuity or were able to complete the higher education.

KEYWORDS

Students mothers. Maternity leave. University.

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Educação Superior e Relações de Gênero: Atividades Domiciliares para Mães Estudantes de Pedagogia

RESUMO

O presente estudo tem por objetivo investigar a realidade de mulheres que se tornaram mães enquanto cursavam Pedagogia, com ênfase para os desafios vivenciados por elas ao conciliar os estudos com a maternidade, bem como a postura da universidade em relação às atividades domiciliares e atendimento a essas alunas. A pesquisa foi realizada por meio de levantamento de informações na Secretaria Acadêmica da universidade e gravação de entrevistas com uma professora e três mulheres que se tornaram mães enquanto estudavam Pedagogia. Os resultados indicam que: apesar de as mulheres conquistarem espaço no mundo acadêmico, quando ocorre a gravidez elas se deparam com dificuldades, ficando acumuladas de atribuições; durante os três meses de licença maternidade, os professores enviam atividades domiciliares, mas as alunas consideram pouco tempo de afastamento; apesar dos desafios vivenciados pelas 34 mães acadêmicas, 91,16% do total deram continuidade ou conseguiram concluir a educação superior.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Mães estudantes. Licença maternidade. Universidade.

Educación Superior y Relaciones de Género: Actividades Domiciliares para Madres Estudiantes de Pedagogía

RESUMEN

El presente estudio tiene por objetivo investigar la realidad de mujeres que se convirtieron en madres mientras cursaban Pedagogía, con énfasis en los desafíos vivenciados por ellas al conciliar los estudios con la maternidad, así como la postura de la universidad en relación a las actividades domiciliarias y atención a esas estudiantes. La investigación fue realizada por medio de levantamiento de informaciones en la Secretaría Académica del universidad y grabación de entrevistas con una profesora y tres mujeres que se convirtieron en madres mientras estudia Pedagogía. Los resultados indican que: a pesar de que las mujeres conquistan espacio en el mundo académico, cuando ocurre el embarazo se enfrentan a dificultades, quedando acumuladas de atribuciones; durante los tres meses de permiso de maternidad, los profesores envían actividades domiciliarias, pero las alumnas consideran poco tiempo de alejamiento; a pesar de los desafíos vivenciados por las 34 madres académicas, el 91,16% del total dio continuidad o consiguieron concluir el educación superior.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Madres estudiantes. Licencia de maternidad. Universidad.

Introduction

Women have gained space in society, and it is common to see women in the most different occupations, such as students, teachers, lawyers, housewives, company managers, business owners etc. However, it is noticeable that women still accumulate functions, having to generally relate them to motherhood.

In this context, the reality investigated here refers to female university students who, after becoming mothers and staying away during maternity leave, face difficulties because they have to carry out academic activities at home, in addition to taking care of the baby and performing household functions. Often, these students, who are torn between concerns about academic, domestic and maternity activities, cannot assimilate the contents of the subjects in the same way as before. And after maternity leave, mothers are faced with an accumulation of academic activities to be carried out, such as internships, work preparation, evaluations, etc., and must comply in the same way as before or risk failing the courses.

Therefore, knowing that mothers face difficulties in their academic training, the present study tried to find possible answers to the following questions: What are the main challenges faced by women when returning to their education after the maternity leave period? How do they reconcile academic life after they have become mothers? What has been the stance of the Naviraí Campus of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (CPNV/UFMS) in relation to home activities and care for these students?

It should be noted that this is an increasingly frequent situation in university courses considered to be feminine, as is the case of Pedagogy (GUEDES, 2008; FERREIRA; SILVA, 2017), since many students are young adults (from 20 to 40 years old), the most appropriate period for procreation, according to Gonçalves (2016).

Thus, the need arose to better understand this reality, believing that it is necessary to know how these student-mothers organize themselves and overcome challenges, in order to avoid a high number of drop-outs due to maternity leave.

Based on the above, the objective of this study is to investigate the reality of female university students who became mothers while attending the Pedagogy course at the Naviraí Campus of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (CPNV/UFMS), highlighting the challenges encountered by them in reconciling studies with motherhood, as well as UFMS's position in relation to home activities and care for these students.

The relevance of this research is justified by its contribution to the academic training process of women who experience motherhood while attending higher education. The results can help Institutions and education professionals to better understand the reality experienced by student-mothers, and can also contribute with the scientific community, in order to broaden the knowledge about this subject.

The methodology used in the research was characterized by bibliographical studies, based on authors who approach the subject, and quantitative and qualitative field research. Data was collected from a survey with the Academic Office of the Naviraí Campus of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (CPNV/UFMS), to know how many students became mothers during their Pedagogy course. Also, interviews were recorded with three students who experienced motherhood and a teacher of the referred higher education course. The results will be shown soon after the presentation of the theoretical approach.

Women X motherhood: achievements and conflicts

Motherhood is something that is highly valued in society and in different means of transmitting values, thus raising some questions: Is motherhood satisfactory for all women? After the baby is born, is it all joyful for the mother? The idea that motherhood is an important female achievement may be related to cultural factors, since girls are educated to become mothers, according to Azevedo (2006, p. 269):

Since childhood, girls are trained for the role of good mother, according to which women should be capable of enormous sacrifices, among them being kind, quiet, understanding, tender, balanced, warm and feminine all the time! An ideal is expected, a model of perfect mother, a romanticized image of motherhood built up over the last centuries, which is based on a rigid standard that cannot admit any trace of ambivalent feelings in mothers.

With the birth of a child, most women experience contradictory feelings that are incompatible with the idealized image of motherhood prevailing in different cultural contexts. All these changes may lead to imbalance and identity confusion due to the high expectations of motherhood prevalent in society. In this sense, "... it is assumed that the woman, because she is the one who carries the children, develops an innate love for the children and becomes the person best able to care for them" (FALCKE; WAGNER, 2000, p. 9). It is thus perceived that culturally the general concepts related to motherhood are strongly based on the myth of the perfect mother.

This obsessive believe that motherhood is "natural" contradicts the experience of motherhood, which can result in a feeling of being an "unnatural mother", causing much suffering. However, this has led many women today to question aspects of what they do, think, feel and then evaluate their own experiences, trying to make the socially idolized determinist pattern less rigid. Thus, Azevedo (2006, p. 270) emphasizes that:

The problem, however, is that women are no longer prepared for, do not know how to, and do not want to take care of their children as their mothers did. They have other interests, desires, information, expectations and, above all, other alternatives to fulfill themselves as women, which are no longer restricted to motherhood.

It is a change in female behavior, influenced by the various achievements of women in society. Many realize that it is more interesting to develop other functions than to take care of

children, mainly because it is a pleasant but also exhaustive activity. On the other hand, many mothers feel guilty about having to stay away from their children for a long time because of professional activities, as well as students. But it is important to remember that the ideals of motherhood today are not the same as those of other historical and social contexts.

According to Badinter (1985), despite the feeling of guilt, due to the widespread belief that motherhood is the responsibility of feminine nature, women must consider that in previous centuries they did not have the power and influence that started in the nineteenth century, although women have, historically, been considered able to desire and attribute meaning.

It is observed that because society believes in the ideas culturally attributed to women in relation to motherhood throughout history, many are often accused of being abnormal, causing feelings of guilt and intimidation, when they choose not to have children. They can even be excluded, since it is believed that being a mother is innate to the feminine. However, the author points out that these feelings did not exist in the past.

To convince women that it would be important for them to take care of their children, Badinter (1985) points out the increase in mortality of children who were cared for by the wet nurse, and that the mortality of children breastfed by their birth mothers was two times lower. According to Costa (1983, p. 256), “[...] the most likely, however, is that mothers were unaware that maternal breastfeeding was vital to the survival of their children.” In this sense, Badinter says that (1985, p. 211):

Maternal surveillance spread unlimitedly. There was no time of day or night when the mother did not lovingly care her son, by herself. Whether she was in good health or sick, she should remain vigilant. If, however, she fell asleep while the son was ill, she felt guilty of the greatest of maternal crimes: neglect.

Although women are a historical figure attributed with capacities to desire and to attribute meaning, the issue of maternity still touches practically all women emotionally, because they know that not having children by choice or due to other circumstances, entails not realizing an achievement, deviating from a pattern that is fulfilled from century to century, implanting a series of uncomfortable differences (MANSUR, 2003).

Because it is a highly internalized cultural pattern, women without children tend to confront their own feelings and the judgement of others, since, according to Pravaz (1981, p. 97), “... she has an unrevealed mystery inside, she did not show herself from within, did not get to ‘know’ herself entirely.” In general, society understands that motherhood makes women feel complete by reproducing ancestral ways of generating and giving birth. However, Mansur (2003) emphasizes that women expect to have healthy children, establishing their acceptability in the female world and occupying the place reserved for them in the sociocultural context.

It is possible to perceive that the motherhood issue is part of the feminine universe, causing many conflicts for women: if they have children, there is the feeling of guilt for not being the idealized mother, if they do not have them, there are social demands and the perception that they will not feel complete. Thus, in many situations, women's doubts go beyond the option of having or not having children, since they have to decide which moment will be most appropriate to have a child, as pointed by Scott (2012, p. 36):

For women who wish to have children, the current dilemma is: when? Women face the pressure of age (biological factor) and their desire to invest in studies and careers, delaying pregnancy. The “biological clock” insists on going faster than many would like, and older pregnancies continue to be more problematic in medical terms. Thus, if in the 1960s and 1970s contraception was at the center of reproductive concerns, it currently divides space with conception techniques, the great bet of many women postponing motherhood.

Motherhood can be understood as a conflict for modern women who intend to study and invest in their careers. Despite the advances in medicine and the increase in the life expectancy of the population, the best period for female reproduction would be from 20 to 35 years old. Some women become mothers before, being considered teenage mothers, others have children after 40, but it is already considered a risk factor, more likely to be born with a disability. Thus, if a woman has a long life, reaching the age of one hundred, she would have had about two decades to procreate, just as she is studying or building a professional career.

On the other hand, this time dimension implies another factor related to motherhood, school education and professional career: women's perception, according to Mansur (2003), that the fixed image of maternity-fecundity does not suit them, since their part as mothers would be transitory, while the fact of being women is enduring. In considering the increased perspective and the fact that people can live longer, the functions related to motherhood are predominant while the children are dependent, because as they become adults, they tend to go their own ways. Thus, the condition of being a woman lasts for a lifetime, while motherhood goes through different stages, from the total dependence of the children to their autonomy, a period in which, although affective bonds exist, the children do not depend on the maternal care anymore.

When analyzing the issue of motherhood and career, Scott (2012) reflects on the choices women have to make in order to perform both functions: maternal and professional.

From the point of view of individual choices, women face not only the “career versus motherhood” impasse, but also the decision of not having children or postponing their coming, using, for this, the various fertilization techniques offered today: in vitro fertilization (IVF), egg freezing, egg donation, surrogates. Others consider the option of leaving work, or at least working on other bases – on their own, for example, starting their own business – to be able to take care of their children (SCOTT, 2012. p. 36).

According to the author, it becomes difficult to assemble a female profile at the beginning of the 21st century, due to a great adversity present among women in Brazil, as has

been indicated. However, numbers help map some aspects such as schooling, age, “race”, or color, as Scott points out (2012. p. 34):

This indicator hides important inequalities, especially if one considers the education level, the average number of children is almost double (3.2 children) than those who have eight years or more of education (1.7 children on average). Among the reasons that may explain these different behaviors regarding the average number of children among the most educated women, we could point out that they may have more information and access to more effective contraceptive means, including the adequate use of the pill; the interest of investing in their professional career, which would open other perspectives for the future; as well as the fact to be able to plan the pregnancy, avoiding getting pregnant in an inopportune stage of life.

The degree of schooling strongly influences the age in which women have children: more education, more delay in maternity. Women with eight years of schooling have children around the age of 28, while the least educated have children under 25.

The expansion of secondary and university education increased female education in different categories and areas of knowledge. Matos & Borelli (2012) point out that between 1970-1975, for example, the number of women in universities increased five times, while that of men doubled. In the following decades, women’s progress has increased, making them economically more competitive and able to face resistance and prejudice, and increasing their presence in sectors that were out-of-bounds for women until then. In reflecting on these issues, Matos and Borelli (2012, 145) consider that:

Although women’s presence in the university is still focused on the areas of Education and Humanities, there is diversification, with women present in other fields such as Engineering, Architecture, Medicine, Veterinary and Law, in a systematic consolidation of new professional trajectories.

Considering this perspective, Matos & Borelli (2012) emphasize that women’s education is vital for the independence of women, becoming a point of prominence of the female work, fighting for them to have the same rights as men, from the means to exercise certain occupations to remuneration.

Mothers in the Context of Higher Education

Having a child is the dream of almost all women, but this can bring about great transformations in several aspects, since motherhood is usually a unique experience in the life of any woman, as pointed by Tourinho (2006, p. 25):

[...] due to the ideal role that society has imposed on women to assume their children by obligation, of having a mandatory maternal profile, they can suffer from guilt if they cannot handle being a mother. If the woman decides to be a mother, all relationships with the people who live around her will change. There is a new identity for women now: being mothers.

In our society, every mother is considered as *vita* for the development of the baby, since it is born entirely dependent on adults to survive. This thought shows that “because humans are remarkably vulnerable and slow-growing, they require a long period of physical and emotional support” (BEE, 1997, p. 425). These facts suggest that it is necessary to have mothers present with their babies in the first months of life, but this is not always the case.

In the case of mothers who perform other social activities, such as studying or working, they must learn to live with a new reality that they did not know. So how to reconcile motherhood and academic life? This is the great challenge for women who become mothers while studying. According to Costa (2008, p. 30), “[...] university mothers suffer for their motherhood during their undergraduate studies and often end up delaying or even stopping the course to take care of their children, mainly because they have nowhere to leave them.”

In a news report, Sant’Anna (2006) describes what might be an option for student mothers: when interviewing a woman, she declares that she has chosen a distance higher education course, because it does not disturb her professional life or the time she would spend with her child. Therefore, faced with great difficulties in adjusting to academic, maternity and professional life, many of these women seek distance education as an alternative, understanding it to be an option to solve this problem.

When interviewing women who had children while in higher education, Lima (2007) pointed out some of the problems that mothers faced with the arrival of their child and the conciliation with studies. The results indicate that, for the most part, mothers stop higher education with the intention of returning later, counting on possible help from relatives to take care of their children while they study.

The option to stop studying and returning after mother’s life is more stable is not always what really happens. With time, new obstacles and difficulties appear that end up discouraging these women, to the point of giving up on their academic trajectory.

Thus, one can ask: What are the challenges encountered when returning from maternity leave? One of the major difficulties in the return to academic life presents a relevant question that must be considered: the level of school performance ends up being inferior with respect to learning the contents, that is, after this period they cannot learn what is taught, often finding it difficult to understand the university knowledge due to this period away and the new function of being an academic mother.

Regarding the rights of university students who have gone through the experience of motherhood, there are laws that support the students, so they can stay away from the university for three months, without problems with attendance. However, maternity leave for women who work is four months, and can reach six months if the woman is a public employee, as expressed by Rodrigues and Ferreira (2008, p. 15):

An inconsistency in the predicted time lapses can be verified in these laws. While the Federal Constitution guarantees pregnant workers a period of leave of 120 days, educational legislation guarantees only 90 days (3 months) to pregnant students, which has no plausible justification.

While the Federal Constitution of 1988 provides 120 days of leave, educational legislation guarantees only 90 days. This ends up violating one of the constitutional rights of the academic woman and mother. On the other hand, given that in many universities the courses are by semester, depending on the period in which the beginning and end of the maternity leave takes place, there would be a risk that the student would stay away for the entire semester, thus compromising her learning and her academic performance.

The law that supports the education of the pregnant student, regulating the maternity leave period, is Federal Law n. 202, of April 17 of 1975, which effected the home exercise regime, established by Decree n. 1044, of October 21 of 1969. After the birth of the baby, the process of home activity begins, in which the academic mother carries out her studies outside the institution of higher education, and the teachers have to tutor these activities and also provide the necessary support.

Law n. 6.202/75 establishes, on Art. 1, that from the eighth month of pregnancy and for three months, the pregnant student will be assisted by the home activity regime, instituted by Decree n. 1.044, of October 21 of 1969 (BRASIL, 1975).

There are Laws that regulate and guide the home activity regimes in each university, which discuss the right that these academic mothers have in relation to the leave, being able to substitute the classes they did not attend during this period of maternity leave, for home activities. However, it is up to each higher education institution to create its own regulations. In this sense, the Undergraduate Teaching Council of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, through Resolution n. 104, dated July 16, 2010, Art. 2, establishes that “From the eighth month of pregnancy, the academic pregnant woman can be assisted by the system of home activities lasting three consecutive months” (UFMS, 2010, p. 1).

As to the support from teachers and institutions, it is everyone’s duty to provide the necessary support, according to the laws mentioned above. Thus, it is important that course coordinators, teachers and university staff play this role of support for academic mothers, so that they do not give up their training process, since these female students need more support during this transitional period of their lives.

Methodology

To carry out the research, besides the theoretical approach described previously, a quantitative and qualitative field research was also performed. For Sampieri, Collado & Lucio (2006), the research that considers quantitative and qualitative data is called mixed or multimodal, and has the possibility to converge both approaches and to take advantage of its

qualities. Thus, the quantitative data in this study are more general, to have an idea of the number of students withdrawing for maternity leave in the higher education course investigated and whether they have returned or dropped out of college. On the other hand, the qualitative data are derived from the perspectives of the research participants on the researched subject, since, according to Creswell (2010, p. 43), the qualitative approach is characterized as “[...] a means to explore and to understand the meaning that the individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem”.

The field research was carried out at CPNV/UFMS, and the Pedagogy course, implemented in 2009, was prioritized along with the mentioned Campus (UFMS, 2008). Considering that the mentioned undergraduate course is composed mainly by female students, and that very often there are pregnant students, we opted to investigate only this higher education course, which is a night course.

It should be noted that the CPNV/UFMS offers 60 annual spots for the Pedagogy course, but in 2009 the class only had 36 students enrolled. In the following years, spots were filled, but as there is a process of withdrawals, drop-outs and transfers, the classes from 1st to 4th year of the course usually have on average 40 students, most of them female.

To carry out the field research, we opted to collect the data in three different ways: a) survey in the Academic Office to identify how many students have taken maternity leave since the implementation of the course and the CPNV in 2009 until the month of November, 2017; b) interviews with three students who had children, one of whom was still on leave, another who had returned and continued to study and another who had dropped out of college after giving birth; c) interview with a teacher who, for two decades, worked as a higher education teacher, more specifically in the Pedagogy course, and who accompanied the experience of the academic mothers who went on leave and carried out home activities, and who also had the experience of having two children when she was student. Thus, four women participated in the research: three Pedagogy students from the UFMS/CPNV and one Pedagogy teacher, according to Table 1. The names used are fictitious, to preserve the identity of the participants.

Table 1. Profile of the research participants.

Participants	Age	Profession	Children while studying	Who stayed with the baby while they studied	Planned pregnancy
SARAH	31 y/o	Housewife	First child	Husband	Unplanned
HELOISA	25 y/o	Member of Parliament	First child	Husband	Planned
LÍVIA	26 y/o	Housewife	First child	Mother, father and husband	Unplanned
PROF. GABRIELA	46 y/o	University Professor	Second and third child	Husband, father-in-law, stepmother and aunt	Unplanned

Source: Authors (2018).

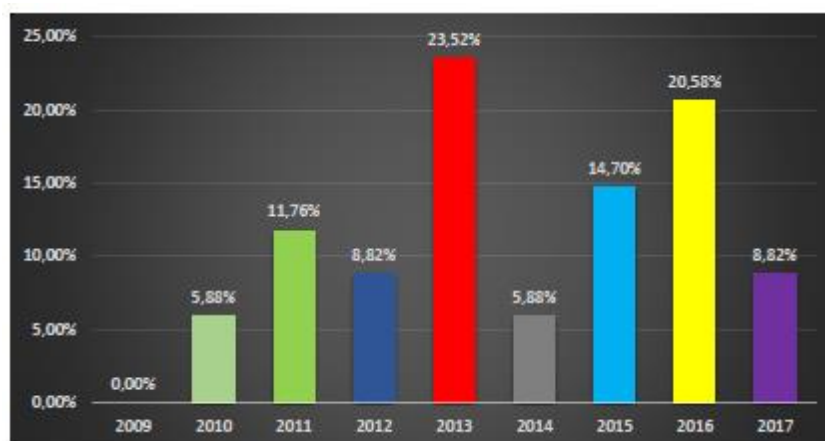
As for the procedure for carrying out the field research, initial contact was made with the Academic Office of the CPNV/UFMS and then researched, along with the protocol book, the requests for home activities due to maternity leave. With the students and teacher, contact was made, a time was scheduled and then the interviews were recorded at the university or at the participants' home, always considering what was best for them. During data collection, the participants signed a Free and Informed Consent Form, authorizing the dissemination and publication of research data.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative data obtained through the data collection were organized, systematized and analyzed, being based on other related studies, as presented below.

Quantitative data on Pedagogy Students Who had Children

Since the implementation of the Pedagogy course, together with the CPNV/UFMS, in 2009, up to November 2017, it was found that 34 Pedagogy students had children and did home activities. The annual percentages are shown in Graph 1.

Graph 1. Number of Pedagogy students who had children – by year.



Source: Authors (2018).

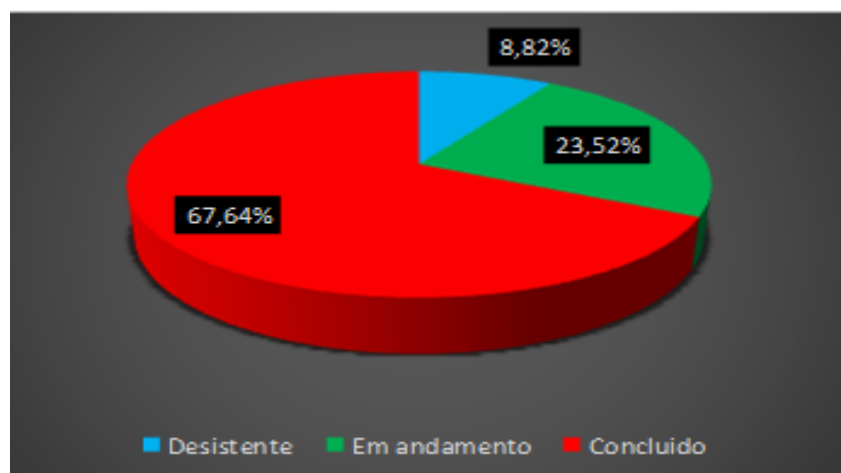
The Graph shows that 2013 was the year when most students became mothers, totaling 8 cases, or 23.52% of the total, followed by 2016, with 7 cases, or 20.58%. In 2015 there were 5 leaves, or 14.70%; in 2011 there were 4 leaves, or 11.76%; in 2012 and 2017 there were 3 leaves, or 8.82%; in 2010 and 2014, there were 2 cases, or 5.88%. Only in 2009 there were no cases of withdrawal to the home-based care regime due to maternity leave, but it is important to consider that the university was in the implementation phase and there was only one Pedagogy class with 36 students. From 2012, the CPNV/UFMS had four classes of this undergraduate course and, since then, 2014 was the year when proportionally there were fewer maternity leaves.

It should be noted that the results presented were considered until November 2017, when the quantitative data collection was completed. However, in contact with the four Pedagogy classes, it was noticed that there were four pregnant students. However, they were not considered for this study, because they had not requested maternity leave yet.

Other situations that are often perceived at CPNV/UFMS, including in 2017, are that there are pregnant students attending the last semester of higher education in Pedagogy, but who do not request home activities, to finish the graduation requirements, as well such as Graduation, before the birth of the baby. On the other hand, there are cases of female students who enter the university immediately after giving birth, who must face the same challenges of reconciling academic activities with motherhood. However, these were also not considered in this study, since it prioritized students who had children and carried out home activities when they were enrolled and attending the Pedagogy course at CPNV.

A very positive fact, which was perceived from the quantitative data survey, is that most students who had children during the course continue their studies and are able to complete the higher education, as demonstrated in Graph 2.

Graph 2. Situation of student-mothers after maternity leave



Source: Authors (2018).

Graph 2 demonstrates that 67.64% of the students who applied for maternity leave during the years 2009 to November 2017 completed higher education, 23.52% were still in progress and only 8.82% dropped out. That is, in a total of 34 women who became mothers while attending Pedagogy, 91.16% returned to university and continued their studies, even though they had to reconcile academic activities with caring for their baby, as well as several other obligations that are culturally attributed to the female gender.

This fact shows that, no matter how many difficulties and challenges the student-mothers have experienced, most can face the new life and continue with their professional training process. It is worth remembering that in some cases, in order to avoid having to drop out of the university, some student-mothers opt to take time off of some disciplines during the

baby's newborn phase, so they can carry out academic activities and give the necessary attention to the child. In this case, it takes them a little longer to complete higher education, but it is the way they found, with determination, to achieve the desired academic degree. According to Barbosa & Rocha-Coutinho (2007), women who are focused on professional training, most times, do not interrupt the trajectory due to maternity leave, but come to understand that both the profession and the care for the baby require a lot of dedication.

If there are many women who focus on training and profession, even before their children are born, there are some who prioritize spending time with the child. Perhaps this is the reason why 3 out of the 34 female Pedagogy students at CPNV/UFMS (corresponding to 8.82%), gave up their undergraduate course. Nevertheless, this number of dropouts may be considered low, in the total number of graduates (23 out of 34 or 67.64%), as well as those still in progress (8 women, or 23.52%).

This is a significant and quite positive difference when comparing the number of women who continue with the studies and who give up because, despite all the difficulties experienced by academic mothers (as presented below, through the results of the qualitative research), they were persistent and did not give up on continuing and completing their higher education.

Perspective of Pedagogy Student-Mothers

Before analyzing the reports of the three students interviewed, it is important to consider some characteristics of each of them. Although there were many Pedagogy students who met the criteria of the research, we opted to prioritize one who had already returned from the period of maternity leave and continued her studies, one who was on maternity leave at the time of the interview (June and July 2017), and another who dropped out of the course after the baby was born.

Sarah is a mother who continued her studies after the period of maternity leave. She was 31, and this was her first child. She was attending the seventh semester of Pedagogy, doing only undergraduate research. She lived with her husband and her daughter and was not working outside the home. Regarding the decision to have children, Sarah mentions that the pregnancy was unplanned and that her husband helped her take care of the baby during the period of maternity leave, so she could do the work requested by the teachers. *"The only person who helped me was my husband [...] especially at night!"* (SARAH).

Lívia was 26 years old, lived with her daughter and her husband. When the interview was recorded, she was still on maternity leave and was in the third semester of the Pedagogy course. She also did not work outside the home. Lívia points out that the pregnancy was unplanned, and that her parents and husband helped her to care for the baby so she could carry out her academic work.

Heloisa was the only mother who planned to have her son, since she and her husband wanted to have a child because they had been married for some time. However, Heloisa was the one who gave up the Pedagogy course because she considered it very difficult to reconcile her new life as a mother with her studies. *“During the period when I was pregnant, and since I worked during the day, I would come home and sometimes I wanted to rest and I had to go to college, it was kind of hard!”*

Heloisa studied until the third semester of the course and dropped out of higher education after becoming a mother because she claims to have experienced contradictory feelings about motherhood, thus choosing to focus only on the care for the baby. In reflecting on how women feel when they become mothers, Parker (1997) points out that the experience of motherhood is often accompanied by ambivalent feelings, sometimes good and sometimes bad, which are experienced by most women with small children.

In reporting on difficulties in the process of becoming mothers during their undergraduate studies, Pedagogy students mentioned that they had some setbacks, needing to take time off from the course in Sarah’s case, or to drop out of college in the case of Heloisa.

The problem came after the baby was born! Reconciling the whole process of college, the entire schedule with the baby. [...] The arrival of a baby leaves people’s houses and souls all mixed up, right? (laughs). You get some happy moments, but you also face a lot of problems (SARAH).

It really is trying to reconcile the two things, completing the works on deadline, it is very difficult! Even more with a newborn, they take all your time [...] during the first months, mine just cried! (LÍVIA)

After the baby was born, I was discouraged, I lost the urge to go to college, I felt sorry for leaving her at home, I did not have much support either! If I could count on someone that I would be in college and she would be alright it would be different, this situation was very hard (HELOISA).

From these stories, it is possible to perceive emotionally ambivalent feelings, characteristic of an experience that relates to a person or situation. In the case of these women, difficulties arose when they became mothers during higher education because of the lack of ability to understand and think about their emotions and feelings. For Touro (2002), it is through affectivity that we identify with other people and thus become apt to love or hate them. Costa (2008) also points out that often student-mothers end up delaying or even dropping out of the course by prioritizing the care for their children. In this sense, Sarah argues: “Many times I thought about giving up, other times I thought about taking time off so I could wait for her to grow up, so I could come back.” So, in order not to give up or take time off from the undergraduate degree, Sarah left two disciplines behind, delaying her graduation for a year, so she could take care of the baby, the workload and the assessments that college requires.

When mentioning whether they planned on having a child during higher education, two mothers stressed that there was no planning, as highlighted by Sarah *“My expectation*

was to get pregnant in the last semester of the course. But it was not what happened, she came before.” Livia also said: “Well, it was not a decision! It happened! I intended to have children, but only later.”

On the other hand, the only participant who planned to have the child argued: “Since I was newly married and my husband wanted a son very much, we dated for a long time and so we decided... we planned to have the child.” And the only one who planned to be a mother ended up giving up her college education and said that she regretted that decision “... so many people became pregnant with me, I think that of all those who became pregnant in my class, I was the only one who gave up [...] I admire the mothers who persist, I wanted to have done it, today I regret it” (HELOISA).

The three students interviewed commented on the time they were away on maternity leave, evidencing that this period had been a very complicated phase, due to the setbacks generated by motherhood.

Then came the work to do at home and I ended up writing them with the baby on my lap! Breastfeeding! Typing! [...] I got home activities when the baby was, I think, fifteen days, I did everything with her nursing, with her sometimes in the stroller next to me, while I typed and studied.

Still according to Sarah, “It was rough! I ended up doing OK, but not great! [...] so it was very hard! It was very complicated!”

Livia emphasizes that she would not have been able to carry out the activities if it were not for her mother’s help with the baby. “Look, it was complicated! It was very difficult! If I did not have my mother’s help... I would not be able to handle it! I would not! I’m sure!” Heloisa points out that because she did not have her husband’s support during this period, due to fear and insecurity, she chose not to return from maternity leave: “I did not even return! After I had [her daughter], due to the difficulties, I thought it best to give up, I did not even go back!”

The interviewees’ statements demonstrate that in general maternity leave is considered to be a very difficult period. However, despite all the setbacks, they can carry out their activities. But Heloisa reports that she did not manage to reconcile this phase, and even harmed the continuity of her studies. Regarding teacher support, deadlines, and home-based learning outside the university, two respondents answered:

This thing of reading the texts and having to summarize them your head without the support of the teacher, without listening to the teacher’s explanation, is very complicated!!! [...] So I was very unfocused! I did not know what was important, I was very much in doubt! To understand at home! Learning at home is very complicated! (LÍVIA)

It was quite difficult because we are not there in the classroom, not following the teacher. Most of the work that came to me was texts that were being talked about and studied in the classroom. So, like... I was not there! I did not hear the teacher talking! So I had to get information, I sent some emails asking for guidance, I did

not get the emails back, so I had to study alone! It was me and myself studying!!! I did not have this guidance, I received the emails with the evaluation proposals, but I did not have guidelines to do them (SARAH).

The reports show that the student-mothers went through a process of great difficulty during this period of absence, which influenced the learning process. This was due to a lack of guidance from teachers, since they were absent from classes, and because of the difficulties in having to carry out many activities at home and so little time, due to the limited time available to them, as emphasized by Sarah: “*Pretty hard!!! Very difficult indeed!!! Because the deadlines were short! The deadlines were short!*” Lívia also points out: “[...] *to do the activities at home was crazy! Madness! I woke up early while she [the child] was asleep, I ran to do it! If she woke up, it was done!!! Then I could not do anything!*” As for returning to university after the period of maternity leave, Sarah states that:

This whole pregnancy and maternity leave process was difficult, but the return was worse. I thought I was not going to be able to deal with it! But going back, nothing changes! Just as it is for mother and for others, it does not matter! It's still the same! Same workload, not flexible!

According to Lima (2007), many university mothers have some type of problem with the arrival of a child, leading to them taking time off from the course with the intention of returning. But this is not always what happens, because due to difficulties and obstacles, they give up, or choose to take distance learning courses. In this sense, Heloisa comments: “[...] *I decided to take time off from college and I started a course at SENAC... I did not go back to UFMS... I decided to do another college, a private one that was only twice a week, so it seemed quite feasible to me.*”

In view of the above, all of them had some difficulties due to becoming mothers during higher education, having to face the period of maternity leave, performing home activities. For Nascimento (2004, p. 227), “*Maternity leave has two objectives: to enable women to recover from childbirth, and to give them the possibility of staying with the child in such an important period.*” Therefore, we must consider that the objective of maternity leave is to favor rehabilitation, as well as provide conditions for the mother to have initial contact with the baby, to nurse, to breastfeed, preserving her health at that delicate stage. However, the interviewee Lívia shows dissatisfaction with the law that protected them:

I think there should be a little more time, I think they could extend it a little longer! When I came here to find out how long it was, I thought it was six months, then I learned it was just three!!! It's the issue of breastfeeding, you're still breastfeeding [...] this law, it has to improve a lot! They had to make it longer and also make it more favorable for us regarding the university work, right? (LÍVIA).

Lívia's report shows that there is no denying that the maternity leave for students should be as provided by the Federal Constitution, that is, 120 days, and not 90 days. It turns out that in the case of universities where the courses are semiannual and not annual, as is the case of UFMS, it becomes more difficult to extend the period of absence because it could result in students on maternity leave not following any of the classes of that semester, compromising the quality of their academic training process.

Perspective of the Higher Education Professor - Pedagogy

To begin the discussion, it is essential to highlight the professor's profile, considering that the interviewee worked for several years as a higher education professor, including at the Pedagogy course where the academic mothers studied. Thus, this professor followed several situations of students who opted for home activities when they became mothers. In addition, the professor herself had the experience of having children when she was a graduate student and a Master's candidate.

This is Professor Gabriela, who was 46 years old, married and had three children, Foundation degree in Primary Teaching, Pedagogy undergraduate degree, Master's degree and an EdD. Commenting on how she attended girls on maternity leave, she explained:

[...] when the person goes on maternity leave I do not send activities right after she went, no!!! I wait a while! I check what part of the semester that person will be on leave, I do not send anything at first, I wait a long time, sometimes I send it all at once, depending on the situation I send parts [...] And I warn, "I'm sending it, yes, I was giving you time to enjoy the baby, but I'll send it" (PROF. GABRIELA).

It can be noticed that, according to the professor, she allows a longer period for the mother to recover from the pregnancy and the child's birth, besides enabling conditions for the student-mother to dedicate herself to the newborn baby in the first days of life. The participant mentions that with some students she has a more frequent dialogue, with others not: *"Look, in general, some people talk more, open up more, say more, others, less!" (PROF. GABRIELA).*

In relation to the professors' contribution to these students, Prof. Gabriela says: *"[...] Look, I think we end up helping, yes! In the sense that we try to be more patient, they have to adapt and sometimes they have that insecurity."* She argued that when she was a student, there was no support from the professors or the university.

For my experience here at the university, where I've been since 2009, I think in general the teachers are more understanding, collaborate more than before, for example, I think I had no collaboration at all! None! In fact, it was even harmed! I had no support! (PROF. GABRIELA).

As for the contribution of professors in her academic training process, Prof. Gabriela points out that *"[...] the professors, I did not find that they facilitated and contributed, no! They probably thought, 'Why did you get pregnant? Why did not you just finish school first?'"*

Regarding support from professors for these students, Prof. Gabriela reports that nowadays she sees and observes that other professors put themselves more in the position of the student, they try to collaborate, not in the sense of making it easier, but of trying to make it easier for them not to give up on higher education. *"Most professors believe that they contribute, so that people won't stop the course, so they [student mothers] can continue and finish the course."* Prof. Gabriela compares how she was in her day and states: *"I see a*

difference, I see that today it is easier and calmer to deal with this situation than when it was me, in the 1990s.”

About the experiences of motherhood experienced by the professor when she was a student, Prof. Gabriela says that she had no plans to become pregnant during her graduation, that the goal was to study and work first, but that was not what happened. *“Look, when I entered the undergraduate course in Pedagogy, my intention was not to have children, but to graduate first.”*

Considering the Prof. Gabriela’s account, regarding the decision to be a mother while studying, we noticed that both the professor and many UFMS Pedagogy students did not plan the pregnancy, but in the case of the said professor, she chose to take time off from the course for a time.

Since I had not planned it, it just happened. The following year I took time off because I wanted to work, and I did not think I would have a baby, work and study. I said, “I will not be able to handle everything! I have to choose something.” So I chose to take time off from the course, to take care of the child and work (PROF. GABRIELA).

The professor’s attitude, as well as of the student Sarah, who did not totally take time off, but decreased the number of disciplines, thus postponing her graduation, relate to the assumptions of Costa (2008) and Sant’Anna (2006), who state that some academic mothers, faced with the difficulties experienced after the birth of the baby, decide to delay, drop out or take distance courses in order to reconcile both roles, motherhood and student life.

Still about her experience in this period, the professor recalls when she was getting her Master's degree, which for her was a strong experience, since she became pregnant with her second child, who, once again, had not been planned. She then applied for maternity leave and was denied.

I went to university and said, “I came here to apply, and talk see if I have the right to take an early leave, at least in the first moments.” He [the course coordinator] said: “No! No, you do not! Either you come to study or you give your spot to someone else, you can’t take maternity leave in graduate school!” (PROF. GABRIELA).

The professor’s reply shows that that, although Law n. 6.202/75 establishes the right to home regime for pregnant students, she had this right denied. Perhaps in the period in which Prof. Gabriela was getting her Master’s degree there was no regulation for Graduate Programs, since nowadays CAPES Ordinance n. 248, of December 19, 2011, establishes that scholarship holders have the right to extend the scholarship for another four months, corresponding to the period of maternity leave:

Art. 1 - The maximum regulatory periods of validity of scholarships in the country and abroad, equal to or greater than 24 (twenty four months), destined to the qualification of master’s and doctorate degrees, may be extended for up to 4 (four) months, if the temporary leave of the activities of the fellow are proved to be caused

by childbirth during the period of validity of the respective scholarship (BRASIL, 2011).

When analyzing the reports of Prof. Gabriela and comparing with the three academic mothers interviewed, it can be noticed that all had setbacks related to maternity and all consider that this phase results in difficulties to reconcile academic activities with the baby and breastfeeding. There is still the fact of having someone to take care of the child, to be able to study.

So that was very difficult for me because I left her at twelve days [...] In addition, I suffered because I had no milk, I could breastfeed her, but I did not have enough to leave it for her to have afterwards. So that was one thing I had a hard time reconciling: breastfeeding with the schedules. Besides, I had the trouble of finding someone to care for her when I went to school (PROF. GABRIELA).

Through the reports from the professor, it becomes explicit that becoming a mother during higher education has not always been easy, and it is evident that both today and before, motherhood is a phase that causes setbacks in women's personal, professional and academic life. But, like most of the CPNV/UFMS Pedagogy students who become mothers during graduation, Prof. Gabriela also managed to complete her training process and later became a master and EdD, indicating that women, despite the difficulties, have managed to reconcile activities related to motherhood, studies, profession, among many others.

Final considerations

Considering the issues that gave rise to the present study, from the research carried out, it is evident that there is a series of conceptions about the reality of women who become mothers during higher education. This shows that the idea of being a university mother is not so simple, since there are several circumstances that make these women's lives more difficult and more demanding.

Given the data obtained, it was possible to verify that, although women are gaining space in the academic world, there are many difficulties experienced by student-mothers, who have accumulated functions, because they have to reconcile higher education with motherhood. In addition, there is the challenge of having to conduct academic activities at home, taking care of the baby and performing other domestic activities at the same time. Some students choose to take fewer courses or take time off the course temporarily, and then return later, without giving up the goal of having a higher education degree.

From the data obtained through quantitative research, it is evident that however many difficulties academic mothers face, most of them manage to reconcile and complete the course, even when the child is born. Thus, among the total of 34 women who became mothers during the Pedagogy course at CPNV/UFMS, only 3, or 8.82%, dropped out of the course, which can be considered a low number, since 23 of the total, or 67.64% of the total, concluded the course, and 11, or 23.52%, were still in progress.

Regarding the university position, during the three months of maternity leave, the professors send home activities, but the students consider the time away to be too short. However, there was an improvement in relation to the period in which the professor interviewed went through the experience of becoming a mother while studying.

It is worth noting that the present study did not intend to exhaust this subject, since it is important to have new research in the area in order to better understand reality, as well as the difficulties experienced by women who become mothers while attending higher education, as well as ways to contribute to the permanence of these women in university.

Thus, from the research carried out, it is clear that reconciling the life of an academic mother with the university, as well as several other assignments, is not an easy task. But, despite the challenges, most mothers of the CPNV/UFMS Pedagogy course are determined to achieve the goal of completing higher education.

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