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BETWEEN MOTHERHOOD AND GRADUATION: ACADEMIC AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES OF PREGNANT WOMEN AND MOTHERS IN UNIVERSITY FROM THE COMMUNITY OF PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

ENTRE MATERNIDADE E GRADUAÇÃO: EXPERIÊNCIAS ACADÊMICAS E EMOCIONAIS DE GESTANTES E MÃES UNIVERSITÁRIAS DA COMUNIDADE DOS PAÍSES DE LÍNGUA PORTUGUESA

ENTRE LA MATERNIDAD Y LA GRADUACIÓN: EXPERIENCIAS ACADÉMICAS Y EMOCIONALES DE MUJERES EMBARAZADAS Y MADRES UNIVERSITARIAS DE LA COMUNIDAD DE PAÍSES DE LENGUA PORTUGUESA

Francisco Cezanildo Silva Benedito[1], Vladson Gouveia Ferreira[2], Genesia Neuriane Alves Pinheiro[3], Jôsy Renata Moreira Machado[4], Ana Karine Rocha de Melo Leite[5], Erika Helena Salles de Brito[6], Rodolfo de Melo Nunes[7], Ana Caroline Rocha de Melo Leite[8]

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ABSTRACT

Pregnant women and mothers enrolled in university programs in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), particularly those participating in international mobility programs, face academic and emotional challenges in adapting to undergraduate studies. This research aimed to examine the academic and emotional experiences of pregnant and mothering university students from the CPLP during their undergraduate studies. This is a qualitative study conducted with pregnant students and mothers from the University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (Unilab), between November 2018 and August 2019. After obtaining informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The responses were analyzed using Content Analysis. The Research Ethics Committee of Unilab approved the project. The responses from the 28 students fell into three categories, ranging from the psychological and academic repercussions of peers attitudes to the return to educational activities and childcare. An international pregnant student reported that the pregnancy diagnosis was marked by shock, uncertainty about childcare, and intensified apprehension due to her status as a foreigner in an adverse academic context. Furthermore, a Brazilian mother's description highlighted the premature return to classes, incomplete recovery, and an exhausting routine of caring for the baby, compromising cognitive ability, academic attendance, and performance during undergraduate studies. It was concluded that pregnant and mothering university students from the CPLP face academic and emotional challenges throughout pregnancy and the postpartum period, intensified by unwelcoming attitudes in the university environment. The mismatch between academic demands and the needs of motherhood compromises students' performance, course retention, and well-being, especially among international students.

KEYWORDS: *Pregnant women. Mothers. Universities. Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries.*

[1] Nurse; PhD in Morphofunctional Sciences from the Federal University of Ceará (UFC), Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil.
[2] Nurse; Master's Student in the Graduate Program in Nursing at the University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB), Redenção, Ceará, Brazil.
[3] Undergraduate Pharmacy Student at UNILAB.
[4] Dentist; Master's Degree Holder and PhD Candidate in the Graduate Program in Family Health – Northeast Network for Training in Family Health (RENASF) – UNILAB.
[5] Veterinarian; PhD in Medical Sciences from the Federal University of Ceará (UFC); Professor at the State University of Ceará (UECE), Quixeramobim, Ceará, Brazil.
[6] Veterinarian; PhD in Veterinary Sciences from the State University of Ceará (UECE); Professor at UNILAB.
[7] Pharmacist; PhD in Medical Sciences from the Federal University of Ceará (UFC); Professor at UNILAB.
[8] Dentist; PhD in Medical Sciences from the Federal University of Ceará (UFC); Professor at UNILAB.

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RESUMO
Gestantes e mães universitárias da Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP), sobretudo em mobilidade internacional, enfrentam desafios acadêmicos e emocionais na adaptação à graduação. Essa pesquisa objetivou analisar as experiências acadêmicas e emocionais de gestantes e mães universitárias da CPLP durante a graduação. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo realizado com acadêmicas gestantes e mães da Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira (Unilab), no período de novembro de 2018 a agosto de 2019. Após o consentimento, foi realizada uma entrevista individual e semiestruturada. As respostas foram avaliadas por meio da Análise de Conteúdo. O projeto foi aprovado pelo Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa da Unilab. As respostas das 28 estudantes originaram três categorias, as quais envolveram desde as repercussões psicológicas e acadêmicas frente às atitudes de colegas até o retorno às atividades acadêmicas e os cuidados com o filho. Uma gestante internacional informou que o diagnóstico da gravidez foi marcado por choque, incertezas quanto ao cuidado infantil e apreensão intensificada pela condição de estrangeira em contexto acadêmico adverso. Ainda, a descrição de mãe brasileira evidenciou o retorno precoce às aulas, com recuperação incompleta e rotina exaustiva de cuidados ao bebê, comprometendo a capacidade cognitiva, frequência acadêmica e desempenho na graduação. Concluiu-se que gestantes e mães universitárias da CPLP enfrentam desafios acadêmicos e emocionais ao longo da gestação e do puerpério, intensificados por atitudes pouco acolhedoras no ambiente universitário. O descompasso entre as exigências acadêmicas e as demandas da maternidade compromete o rendimento, a permanência no curso e o bem-estar das estudantes, especialmente das internacionais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Gestantes. Mães. Universidades. Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa

RESUMEN
Las mujeres embarazadas y madres matriculadas en programas universitarios de la Comunidad de Países de Lengua Portuguesa (CPLP), especialmente las que cursan programas de movilidad internacional, enfrentan desafíos académicos y emocionales para adaptarse a los estudios de grado. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar las experiencias académicas y emocionales de las mujeres embarazadas y madres matriculadas en programas universitarios en el contexto de la CPLP. Este es un estudio cualitativo realizado con estudiantes embarazadas y madres de la Universidad de Integración Internacional de la Lusofonía Afrobrasileña (Unilab), entre noviembre de 2018 y agosto de 2019. Tras obtener el consentimiento informado, se realizaron entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas. Las respuestas se evaluaron mediante un análisis de contenido. El proyecto fue aprobado por el Comité de Ética en Investigación de Unilab. Las respuestas de los 28 estudiantes se clasificaron en tres categorías, que iban desde las repercusiones psicológicas y académicas de las actitudes de sus compañeros hasta el regreso a las actividades académicas y al cuidado de sus hijos. Una mujer embarazada internacional informó que el diagnóstico de embarazo estuvo marcado por el shock, la incertidumbre sobre cómo cuidar a sus hijos y una mayor aprensión debido a su condición de extranjera en un contexto académico adverso. Además, la descripción de una madre brasileña destacó el regreso prematuro a clases, la recuperación incompleta y la agotadora rutina del cuidado del bebé, lo que afectó su capacidad cognitiva, su asistencia académica y su rendimiento en sus estudios universitarios. Se concluyó que las estudiantes universitarias embarazadas y madres de la CPLP (Comunidad de Países de Lengua Portuguesa) enfrentan desafíos académicos y emocionales durante el embarazo y el posparto, agravados por actitudes hostiles en el entorno universitario. La discordancia
entre las exigencias académicas y las necesidades de la maternidad compromete el rendimiento académico, la retención académica y el bienestar de las estudiantes, especialmente de las internacionales.

PALABRAS CLAVE*: Mujeres embarazadas; Madres; Universidades; Comunidad de Países de Lengua Portuguesa*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy is a unique milestone in a woman's life and remains culturally linked to social expectations across diverse sociocultural contexts (Nordzi; Dusu; Kusi, 2022). The transition to motherhood represents one of the most profound changes in a woman's life, involving psychological, physical, and social transformations, as well as the reconfiguration of family relationships, the redefinition of priorities, and the establishment of a bond with the newborn (Talukdar; Baruah, 2022; Leanderz et al., 2025). This process can simultaneously generate feelings of joy while introducing intense emotional demands (Talukdar; Baruah, 2022).

In the university environment, however, pregnancy and motherhood assume distinct characteristics. Pregnant students or mothers face demands that differentiate them both from pregnant students who are not studying and from childless peers (N-yelbi, 2024). Evidence suggests that pregnancy and motherhood in higher education are often unplanned, which amplifies vulnerability to psychosocial stress and hinders adaptation to academic routines (N-yelbi, 2024; Silva; Oliveira; Silva, 2025).

The need to reconcile multiple roles imposes high physical, emotional, and organizational costs, constituting an ongoing and multifaceted challenge (Uwakwe et al., 2021; Silva; Farias De Oliveira; Oliveira, 2025). Everyday situations, such as attending classes or taking assessments while caring for sick children, become recurring sources of stress, affecting academic retention and performance (Kisanga; Matiba, 2023).

In addition to these difficulties, there are relationship problems experienced with colleagues and professors. Stigma, discrimination, and derogatory comments directed at student mothers contribute to emotional distress, feelings of inadequacy, and institutional isolation (Kisanga; Matiba, 2023). The perception of incompatibility between the roles of mother and student perpetuates discriminatory practices and compromises academic integration (Navarro-Cruz; Dávila; Kouyoumdjian, 2021).

The pressure inherent in motherhood during university studies is heightened when this reality is experienced in a foreign country. University support, which is generally limited, exacerbates this scenario, resulting in frustration with education and, in more severe cases, discontinuation of the process (Rhoden; Kinchington, 2021). In parallel, the absence of a family support network negatively impacts these mothers' coping mechanisms, which, combined with distance and restricted professional opportunities due to their new role, can trigger feelings of guilt, depression, and anxiety (Koo; Nyunt, 2022).

Despite the relevance of the psychological impacts and difficulties faced by pregnant women and mothers in university, there is still a scarcity of research that considers different sociocultural contexts. Recent literature indicates that this gap constitutes an emerging problem, given the

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association between these experiences and substantial risks to mental health, quality of life, and academic performance (N-yelbi, 2024).

In this context, the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) stands out as a space for international cooperation marked by historical, social, and cultural diversity, bringing together countries distributed across different continents but united by the Portuguese language (Souza; Bortot; Scaff, 2023) and by increasing academic flows between their higher education institutions. In this scenario, there is an increase in student mobility and the participation of women in higher education (Loch; Torres; Costa, 2021), which makes the experience of pregnant women and mothers in university more visible, whose academic trajectories are traversed by common and specific challenges related to the sociocultural, institutional, and social support conditions of each country.

Based on the above, this study aimed to examine the academic and emotional experiences of pregnant and mothering university students from the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Language Countries) during their undergraduate studies.

2. METHODS

This is an exploratory study with a qualitative approach conducted at the University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (Unilab), whose facilities are located in the states of Ceará and Bahia. The research was conducted on the Liberdade and Auroras campuses (Redenção, CE) and at the Palmares Academic Unit (Acarape, CE), from November 2018 to August 2019.

The study population consisted of Brazilian and international students from the CPLP, which includes Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, East Timor, and Macau, who were pregnant or mothers at the time of data collection. The participants were regularly enrolled in various on-campus undergraduate courses and semesters at Unilab during the academic periods of 2018.2, 2019.1, and 2019.2.

For inclusion in the research, the following criteria were established: being a pregnant or mother who is Brazilian or an international citizen of the CPLP, aged 18 or older, enrolled in an on-campus undergraduate course at Unilab; being in any stage of pregnancy or having completed maternity leave and returned to undergraduate activities; presenting any gestational/obstetric history (type of pregnancy, risk classification, current and previous complications, and past pregnancy outcomes); and having a healthy or non-healthy child(ren) under 6 years of age (the age range requiring greater third-party care) (United Nations Children's Fund – UNICEF, 2023). Although not employed, mothers whose children were under the care of third parties were excluded.

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Regarding data collection, the project was initially presented to pregnant women and mothers present in the classroom. Upon their acceptance participation, the Informed Consent Form (ICF) was then administered. Absent students, were contacted via email or telephone, and an in-person meeting was scheduled. Subsequently, a semi-structured individual interview was conducted, previously planned and audio-recorded. The interview script addressed the following points: impacts of peer attitudes towards pregnancy, academic demands during pregnancy, and academic return and motherhood.

The sample size was defined during the data collection process, using theoretical saturation as the criterion. This is characterized by the absence of new findings in the testimonies that could contribute to the intended theorization (Rahimi; Khatooni, 2024; Mairink; Gradim; Panobianco, 2021).

The interviews were transcribed in full and the data were analyzed using Content Analysis as proposed by Bardin (2016). This technique was conducted following the three-pronged approach: pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and treatment of the results (inference and interpretation). The transcripts were read and analyzed, after which thematic categories were developed.

To maintain participants' anonymity, which would otherwise make their identification possible, different abbreviations were assigned to pregnant women (PW) and to Brazilian (B) and international (I) university mothers (UM). This differentiation was followed by numbering pregnant women from 1 to 12 and mothers from 13 to 22.

The project was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Unilab, as per opinion number 2.932.282. The autonomy of the subjects, non-maleficence, and beneficence of the research, as stipulated in Resolution 466/12 of the National Health Council, were guaranteed.

3. RESULTS

Although 28 interviews were conducted, only the first 22 were used, as the responses had reached saturation. Thus, 27.3% (n = 06) of pregnant Brazilian university students (BUPW) participated in the study, the same number as pregnant international university students (IUPW) and international university mothers (IUM). As for Brazilian university mothers (BUM), this value was 18.1% (n = 04).

Based on the analysis of the discourses, three categories were developed, namely: (1) psychological and academic repercussions in pregnant university students in the face of colleagues' attitudes; (2) the relationship between academic demands and gestational state; and (3) returning to academic activities and childcare.

- Psychological and academic repercussions in pregnant university students in the face of colleagues' attitudes

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The following account shows how the pregnant Brazilian woman experienced the beginning of the semester and the reunion with colleagues who, for the most part, were unaware of her pregnancy. Her speech reveals the impact of the immediate reactions upon noticing her already visible belly, generating feelings of strangeness, sadness, and fear of being ridiculed. The situation was experienced as profoundly uncomfortable, to the point that she was absent from classes for almost two weeks.

BUPW 01: *When I found out I was pregnant, it was the end of the semester, and the next one was about to start. Only my closest friends knew, right? And when I walked into the classroom on the first day of class, wearing a dress that already showed my belly, everyone was like, "Is she pregnant?" and all that stuff, and I felt strange. I stayed away from class for almost two weeks because I felt sad, afraid of becoming a laughingstock. It was so bad, you know?*

The excerpts below reveal both the initial reactions and the gradual changes in colleagues' attitudes towards pregnancy, as well as the feelings and behaviors of Brazilian and international students, both inside and outside the university environment. Their accounts reveal how excessive curiosity, repeated questioning, whispers, and veiled comments led to feelings of sadness, embarrassment, suffocation, isolation, and avoidance of academic activities. The emotional repercussions extended to the home, where crying and dejection became frequent, especially response to the perceived judgment in the hallways and classrooms.

IUPW 05: *It was tough facing people. Right when my classmates found out about the pregnancy, they bombarded me with questions. I felt suffocated, like I wanted to cry; it made me so down. I didn't even want to go; when I did, I'd sit in the corner. It only got better after they got used to it.*

BUPW 07: *When I went to class with that big belly, I felt embarrassed, mainly because I was 17 when I got pregnant; I only turned 18 last month. I felt like people were whispering about me in the hallways, my classmates sometimes laughed, I pretended not to care, but when I got home or went to the bathroom, I would cry. Only those who have been through it know.*

In the speech of the 12th pregnant international participant, she points out the initial impact of the pregnancy diagnosis, marked by shock, uncertainty regarding childcare, and additional apprehension about experiencing this condition as a foreigner already subjected to various difficulties. Her speech reveals her attempt to conceal the pregnancy in the first few months, as well as the discomfort in the face of judgmental stares in the university environment, which led her to adopt loose clothing to avoid exposure. The experience was accompanied by intense embarrassment and a persistent feeling of anguish.

IUPW 12: *When I found out I was pregnant, it was such a shock. First, because I thought about how I was going to take care of a child, and second, I'm a foreigner, I already face a lot of difficulties, imagine with a child. I hid it for the first few months, but then my belly started showing. I*

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felt judged by the way people at the university looked at me. I wore baggy clothes because it's so awful being stared at. I felt anxious.

- Relationship between academic demands and pregnancy status

The following accounts demonstrate the multiple difficulties faced by pregnant Brazilian women in the face of academic demands and their physical, emotional, and educational repercussions. Participants describe a routine marked by successive activities (exams, seminars, assignments, and practical classes) that results in intense exhaustion, frequent crying spells, and a sense of collapse at the end of the day. Students also report a decline in performance, loss of content due to a lack of physical stamina, and accumulated doubts during assessments. These experiences are associated with failing courses and the desire to drop out, as well as triggering negative perceptions about their own cognitive abilities.

BUPW 03: *Balancing pregnancy and classes isn't easy at all. I have work, exams, seminars, practical courses, and more exams. When I get home, I collapse. Sometimes I cry because I feel so tired and have so much to do. Sometimes I think about dropping out because my grades keep dropping every day.*

BUPW 04: *Sometimes I give up. I've been having a lot of problems because sometimes I don't feel like going to class, I miss out on material, and when the exam comes, I have a lot of doubts. I ended up failing two subjects this semester. I think this pregnancy is making me dumber.*

The transcripts below illustrate how the physiological changes inherent in pregnancy directly affect the academic lives of Brazilian and international students, compromising attention, performance, memory, and motivation to study in the classroom. Participants report persistent drowsiness, poor sleep due to fetal movements, physical discomfort, abdominal pain, difficulty remaining seated, frequent urination, and increased body weight, in addition to transportation-related challenges. These factors lead to difficulty concentrating and keeping up with the class, generating feelings of failure, sadness, and frustration, which can sometimes be intensified by unsatisfactory assessment results.

IUPW 02: *Now I'm constantly tired; it feels like I can never rest. I'm very sleepy, but I can't sleep well because the baby kicks a lot at night. When I come to class, I feel tired and can't concentrate. I feel like a failure because I can't keep up with the class.*

IUPW 06*: My performance has been very low due to poor memory and a lack of motivation; I don't feel like studying and I'm tired. It's complicated, very complicated, because it's difficult due to the weight of my body and because the transportation to get there is also bad.*

BUPW 09: *I'm almost eight months pregnant, I can't concentrate on anything anymore, I can't sit for very long, my stomach hurts, I pee a lot, I'm constantly leaving class, I don't pay attention, I received the grade for a test I took and I was very sad because I don't think I'll pass, I feel frustrated about it, I keep telling you this and I feel like crying.*

- Returning to academic activities and caring for a child

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According to the excerpts below, the return to academic activities after maternity leave is a particularly turbulent time, marked by the difficulty of reconciling the demands of motherhood with the requirements of daily university life. For Brazilian mother number 13, the return is permeated by strangeness, a feeling of disconnection from the academic environment, and constant worry about the well-being of her child, who remained at home, which made her presence in the classroom emotionally distant and a source of stress. For Brazilian mother number 16, the main obstacles include insufficient leave, the challenge of balancing breastfeeding and studying, a lack of time, and the need to prioritize her daughter's care, all of which contribute to failing grades and feelings of sadness about the academic impact of this balancing act.

BUM 13: *It was strange going back to school. Like, it was tough, you know? Because I spent so much time at home, going back to school, not only in terms of keeping up with what was happening, but also in terms of my mind not being here, it was at home, so it was like not being in class at all, because I was only thinking about my son, I was afraid that something would happen to him, that he would get hungry, it's a stressful situation.*

BUM 16: *Extremely difficult, sad! First of all, I think this idea of only three months of leave for students is terrible. I understand it's the university's policy and all, but it's tough because for someone who is breastfeeding, it's complicated. I had to choose between caring for my daughter and pursuing my studies. Obviously, I chose my daughter, and my university studies were taking a back seat. In the semester I returned, I failed three out of the five courses I was taking. I know it was due to a lack of time, but it's saddening because nobody wants to fail and spend more time at university.*

The description from Brazilian mother number 17 reveals that the return to school occurred before her full recovery, causing the period of absence and the exhausting routine of caring for the baby (especially on nights of illness or lack of sleep) to impact her perception of cognitive ability, her presence in the classroom, and consequently, her academic performance. Regarding Brazilian mother number 20, she reports that the return was marked by great difficulty balancing daily care for the young child, completing activities, studying for exams, and experiencing mental overload. This aspect contributes to inadequate sleep and a constant feeling of exhaustion.

BUM 17: *After giving birth, I didn't have time to recover fully, did I? But I had to go back. Because I was out of school for so long, it's not the same after a semester away, and it affected my intelligence a little. Not to mention that I was already going to class exhausted, as some nights the baby doesn't let us sleep. When he's sick, it's even more complicated, because I'm not going to leave him to go to class. That's why my performance is so bad.*

BUM 20: *It was even harder because it's challenging to take care of a small child and do the activities, as well as study for tests. I felt overwhelmed. Sometimes, I would lie down to sleep, but I couldn't, because my head was spinning.*

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4. DISCUSSION

This study, by examining the psychological and academic impact of resuming undergraduate activities and reconciling them with maternal care, can contribute to the implementation of actions that promote health, welcome, and support pregnant women and mothers in higher education. Furthermore, by addressing a globally relevant topic involving educational equity and reproductive health, the research can stimulate discussions and the implementation of public policies and university practices in different countries experiencing this reality, including the CPLP countries.

In terms of results, in the category relating to the psychological and academic repercussions among pregnant women in the face of their peers' attitudes, the Brazilian women's statements regarding physical appearance clearly evidenced the bodily transformations caused by pregnancy, which were accompanied by negative emotions such as sadness and fear of ridicule. These findings may reflect the moral judgments and stigmatization to which pregnant women are vulnerable (Phiri; Nyamaruze; Akintola, 2021). The account of a pregnant student at a university in South Africa corroborates this assumption, who described experiencing contempt, neglect, and a lack of support from friends (Phiri; Nyamaruze; Akintola, 2021).

Regarding the discourse of an international student in this research, her attitude towards her pregnancy differed from that of the Brazilian students, who initially sought to conceal it and later resorted to loose clothing. This behavior can be understood if we consider that pregnancy can accentuate previous experiences of discrimination, interfere with legal residency in the country or the renewal of visas for pregnant foreign women, and be interpreted as a weakness and inadequacy to the "ideal model" of a student. They also justify their behavior by citing fear of academic setbacks, family distance, and lack of financial support. Her discourse also clearly showed judgment by those within the university environment, an event that reaffirms the intolerance mentioned in the study by Phiri; Nyamaruze; Akintola (2021). These reactions and assumptions reveal that pregnancy is a condition depending on the circumstances, requires explanations, justifications, and/or public disclosure.

The responses in this category also referred to feelings of discomfort, aversion, sadness, and fear on the part of Brazilian and international students, perceptions that may result from a sense of non-belonging and marginalization of pregnant women in the educational environment (Ratusniak; César; Silva, 2021; Mahlangu; Ramalepa; Letswalo, 2024). These assumptions, associated with stigmatization, flaws in the structure and attitudes of higher education institutions, may explain the absence and isolation in the classroom and the distancing from academic activities on the part of pregnant women. Regarding the international participant's report of suffocation, this may stem from a hostile, stressful view of the university environment.

In this sense, it is worth noting that the University should provide spaces and resources that facilitate the integration of academic, social, and administrative activities, and are inclusive of

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pregnant women (Santos et al., 2025). According to Santos et al. (2025), higher education institutions should provide infrastructure and services that meet the care and well-being needs of pregnant university students. Thus, academic performance may not be affected, the quality of teaching can be maintained, and gender equality rights can be guaranteed (Santos et al., 2025).

In line with University's role, research conducted by Mahlangu; Ramalepa; Letswalo (2024) with pregnant and mothering university students in South Africa highlighted a lack of support from the educational institution, due to the absence of essential health services. Furthermore, the students proposed offering prenatal care on campus as a way to recognize them as women and not as children.

In terms of feelings, those described here may have been aggravated by the fact that, in addition to the initial helplessness of colleagues, excessive curiosity, repeated questions, whispers, and comments, the participants, especially the international ones, experienced pregnancy and motherhood in territories different from their place of origin and in a scenario of cultural diversity, family anxiety, and academic tensions. For international students, the context may be more complex because they are vulnerable to more intense criticism, have a limited family/support network, and less knowledge of Brazilian social norms. Added to this are linguistic difficulties, cultural differences regarding pregnancy and motherhood, and a lack of daily support, as well as financial dependence and social isolation.

From a consequences standpoint, these changes can lead to behavioral setbacks, negative self-criticism, and academic disengagement. These effects reinforce the notion that pregnancy and motherhood can be seen as a deviation from academic norms, which value high performance.

Regarding the initial impact of the pregnancy diagnosis, marked by shock, uncertainty, and apprehension on the part of the international student - a phenomenon also mentioned by Mahlangu; Ramalepa; Letswalo (2024) - these feelings may stem from a process of psychological adaptation to the new biological state. These reactions may also be related to the perception of loss of control in the face of this new experience and the absence of a support network. The accounts also indicated extensive emotional distress at home, suggesting that the consequences of experiencing pregnancy at the University have repercussions in private life.

Given these findings, the specific vulnerability of pregnant university students becomes apparent, including those experiencing this health condition in culturally distinct contexts. This problem requires the implementation of psychosocial care actions and resources that allow pregnant women to remain in the university environment. It is also necessary to organize activities that integrate mental health, social support, and institutional awareness to promote well-being and self-care, reduce microaggressions and judgments, and foster effective communication between students and faculty.

Regarding the relationship between academic demands and pregnancy, the narrative of the Brazilian student, marked by numerous activities and significant fatigue, revealed the absence of a

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strategy implemented by the University specifically for pregnant students. This lack of implementation by the institution may contribute to the student's illness, given that

her academic routine is characterized by a high workload, voluminous content, and frequent assessments (Santos; Nascimento; Souza, 2025). This scenario can be exacerbated by considering factors such as competitiveness and the fear of failing, disappointing, and jeopardizing professional development (Santos; Nascimento; Souza, 2025).

As a consequence, the student may experience stress, a condition capable of inducing mental exhaustion, concentration problems, and memory loss, as well as causing anxiety and mood swings (Younis et al., 2025). These reactions were clearly reported by Brazilian and international participants, who associated pregnancy with memory lapses and a lack of attention and intelligence. These responses were accompanied by statements from Brazilian female university students about reduced academic performance, the possibility of failing a course, and the desire to drop out, which corroborate the damage caused by stress (Younis et al., 2025).

In addition to this type of repercussion, stress can cause complications such as miscarriage, prematurity, low birth weight, and neurological and immunological disorders. Furthermore, stress can negatively affect the pregnant woman's self-esteem (Gomes et al., 2020), a fact observed in the statements of pregnant women from international colleges, who mentioned feelings of failure and a lack of motivation to study. This low self-esteem can be exacerbated by the typical physical changes of pregnancy, such as increased weight and abdominal volume (Ghamri et al., 2024), as reported by pregnant university students from South Africa (Thabethe; Mulondo; Tugli, 2020).

Regarding the fatigue reported by the participants, especially the international ones, this clinical manifestation constitutes one of the physiological factors experienced during pregnancy, similar to physical changes and hormonal fluctuations. All these aspects promote changes in cognitive function, influencing attention, memory, and information-processing capacity (Ziomkiewicz; Wichary; Jasienska, 2019).

Symptoms reported by Brazilian and international students also included sleepiness, malaise, excess weight, increased urinary frequency, and pain, in addition to fatigue. These reports are consistent with the literature, which cites alterations in the musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, and endocrine systems, among others, that occur during pregnancy (Barbosa et al., 2022). Although physiological, these alterations were able to affect attention, learning, and knowledge, according to the participants, compromising their school performance and causing sadness and frustration (Thabethe; Mulondo; Tugli, 2020).

Regarding the return to academic activities and childcare, this phase of the process is crucial in reconciling the social roles of student, mother, and caregiver. The accounts of pregnant women and mothers in Brazil clearly showed the difficulty of returning to university due to the length of time spent away from this environment. For student 13, this period felt long, hindering her readjustment

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to the university environment. For students 16 and 17, this period of absence was insufficient because it did

not meet the recommended time for exclusive breastfeeding and did not allow full recovery after childbirth, respectively. Furthermore, for participant 17, despite the limited period, it contributed to a reduction in her intellect.

Regarding the mention that the absence from academic activities hindered readjustment to the university environment and affected cognitive performance after maternity leave, these results are understandable given that the university environment is a busy place that demands either fluid/or crystallized intelligence from the student (Costa; Santos; Teixeira-Machado, 2024; Soares; Seabra; Gomes, 2014). The former corresponds more to non-verbal ability than to prior and cultural knowledge. Crystallized intelligence is associated with the ability to learn new concepts, whether or not prior knowledge is involved, which contributes to the ability to solve various problems (Oliveira, 2022).

Regarding the time off described by the mothers, it is worth noting that Law No. 6.202/1975 permits the continuation of studies during pregnancy and a four-month maternity leave, commencing from the eighth month of pregnancy (Pantoja; Freitas, 2024). However, this interval does not align with the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendation for exclusive breastfeeding. Exclusive breastfeeding, which should occur during the first six months of the baby's life (Rimes; Oliveira; Boccolini, 2019), can improve maternal and infant morbidity and mortality rates, establish and strengthen the mother-child bond, and promote the child's physical and cognitive development (Rimes; Oliveira; Boccolini, 2019; Cardoso; Esteves; Garcia, 2025).

This inadequacy in timing and the inflexibility of maternity leave in relation to academic demands can hinder the mother's retention at the University, as it requires her to balance academic activities with childcare (Santos et al., 2025). Furthermore, this lack of flexibility, coupled with a lack of institutional support, can lead to physical and mental overload, dependence on external/family networks, discrimination and embarrassment, as well as compromised mental health, quality of life, and academic performance (Santos et al., 2025). This last point was noticeable in the statements of the Brazilian students.

Furthermore, according to the literature, the mother's abandonment of the educational institution can become a natural process, with her returning only after a favorable situation arises (Ratusniak; César; Silva, 2021). This mentality reinforces the perception that motherhood remains a phenomenon that deviates from the academic norm and neither recognized nor supported by the educational institution.

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To that end, the University should establish measures such as implementing flexible deadlines and hybrid teaching, creating spaces to support breastfeeding, offering psychosocial support, and training teachers (Alves et al., 2023; Silva; Souza, 2024). This need is based on accounts from Brazilian mothers participating in the program, who reported a lack of attention/concentration in the classroom due to their child being at home and the need to choose between caring for the child and studying.

Therefore, higher education institutions must adopt inclusive public policies that are sensitive to the needs of pregnant women and mothers on university campuses, and promote academic environments that support the retention and success of these students, regardless of their nationality.

Other factors mentioned by Brazilian academic mothers included exhaustion from sleepless nights, absence from class due to their child's illness, sadness due to failing grades, and fear of unexpected events happening to the child in their absence. Mentions of sleepless nights and absence from class, mainly due to caring for sick children, corroborate Ratusniak; César; Silva (2021). Fear and sadness were also reported by Silva and Souza (2024).

The findings suggest that pregnancy and motherhood during undergraduate studies are experiences profoundly influenced by institutional and social factors, rather than solely by individual factors. Emotional distress, academic difficulties, and risks to academic retention highlight a university model that is still not very sensitive to the specificities of motherhood, which tends to reinforce the burden on these students. In this sense, the study contributes to the debate on the need for more equitable academic policies and institutional support strategies that promote the retention and educational success of pregnant and mothering university students within the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries.

5. CONCLUSION

The results indicate that pregnant and mothering university students from the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries face academic and emotional challenges throughout pregnancy and the postpartum period, intensified by unwelcoming attitudes in the university environment. The mismatch between academic demands and the needs of motherhood compromises students' performance, course retention, and well-being, especially among international students. These findings underscore the importance of institutional policies that foster academic flexibility, psychosocial support, and greater equity in higher education.

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