NAVIGATING TRANSITIONS: EXPLORING INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS' TRAJECTORY FROM PRIOR WORKPLACE TO ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents insights from a broader study on doctoral students' educational and professional trajectories, with a particular focus on female international doctoral students in the United States. It explores how these women navigate their career paths while balancing the dual responsibilities of academic demands and motherhood. Drawing on feminist perspectives, the study focuses on the experiences of three women from Nigeria, Ghana, and Kazakhstan. It reveals that their decisions to pursue doctoral studies were influenced by both career ambitions and family considerations. The transition was challenging, as they had to balance academic workloads with family responsibilities and help their children adjust to new cultural environments. However, supportive networks—both within academic settings and in the community—were crucial to their success. This research underscores the intersection of gender, motherhood, and international student status, offering valuable insights for policies and practices aimed at better supporting this underrepresented group in higher education.

Keywords: doctoral students, trajectory, workplace, academic programs

Introduction

Over the past four decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of students studying abroad, with international mobility becoming a central feature of global higher education (Beine et al., 2014). In the United States, the number of international graduate students, particularly at the master's and doctoral levels, has seen a steady rise, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic (Opendoors, 2024). The 2022/23 academic year marked a 12% increase in the total number of international students at U.S. colleges and universities, reaching 1,057,188 students. According to Opendoors graduate student enrollment witnessed the most substantial growth, with 467,027 international students pursuing master's, doctorate, or professional degrees. As of Fall 2023, women comprised 51.68% of international students in the United States, a significant increase from 1979-80 when women constituted only 28% of this population (Shorelight, 2023). Among these students, there is a growing cohort of female graduate students, many of whom bring extensive professional experience to their academic pursuits (Gardner, 2009).

Despite a rich body of research focusing on the experiences of female doctoral students (e.g., Carter et al., 2013; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Jaimes, 2020; Lynch, 2008), there remains a significant gap in understanding the holistic educational and professional transitions of female international doctoral students, particularly those who are also mothers. These students often face unique challenges during their academic programs, such as balancing their identities as scholars and caregivers while also navigating additional layers of marginalization, especially for women of color. While existing studies have documented some of these difficulties, few have explored the specific experiences of female international doctoral students through a feminist lens, particularly in terms of their decision-making processes, support systems, and navigation of critical life-course turning points (Lamichhane, 2023; Murad, 2023). Additionally, there is limited knowledge about the career trajectories of international female

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students who are mothers. This study aims to fill these gaps by using feminist perspectives to understand how their roles as mothers and caregivers influence their career motivations and trajectories. Insights from this research can inform policies and practices to better support this growing population in higher education and the highly skilled workforce.

Literature Review

Academic and Career Trajectories of International Doctoral Students

Perkins and Neumayer (2014) investigated the geographical distribution and mobility patterns of international students, focusing on the uneven flows across different regions and countries. They identified several influential factors, including economic opportunities, political stability, and cultural ties, that shape these mobility patterns. Similarly, Beine et al. (2014) examined the academic mobility of international doctoral students, noting that migration costs, network effects, and the quality of higher education at the destination significantly influence students' location choices. These choices are often driven by wage prospects, living costs, and the host country's capacity to accommodate international students.

However, while both studies provide valuable insights into the macro-level factors affecting international student mobility, they fall short in offering a more granular analysis. For instance, Beine et al. (2014) lack a nuanced exploration of how these factors vary by gender and degree level, which are critical dimensions that could influence mobility decisions and outcomes. The absence of such an analysis limits the understanding of the differential impacts that international mobility may have on diverse student groups.

Chen et al. (2020) contributed to this body of literature by focusing on the professional development and career trajectories of international doctoral students, comparing them with their domestic counterparts. Their research highlights significant challenges faced by international students, such as cultural adaptation, language barriers, and differing academic expectations. However, this study also has notable gaps, particularly in its examination of the decision-making processes that underlie international students' career trajectories. By not addressing these aspects, the study misses the opportunity to provide a deeper understanding of how international doctoral students navigate their professional development in the context of these challenges.

Collectively, these studies underscore the need for more comprehensive research that considers gender, degree level, and the nuanced decision-making processes of international doctoral students. Such research would provide a more complete picture of the factors influencing their mobility and professional development, ultimately informing better policies and support systems tailored to their needs.

Academic and Career Trajectories of Female Doctoral Students

The experiences of female doctoral students have been the focus of a substantial body of literature, with many studies examining the challenges they face in balancing academic careers with family responsibilities. For instance, Lee and Bami (2017) explored the emotional and practical struggles these women endure, including the pressures of cultural expectations, gender roles, and the lack of institutional support. Their findings underscore the difficulties female doctoral students face in managing their dual roles as scholars and caregivers. Similarly, studies have analyzed how marriage and parenthood impact the academic careers of graduate students,

particularly women, arguing that the traditional structure of graduate education often fails to accommodate the needs of those juggling family responsibilities alongside their studies (Brown & Watson, 2010; Mason & Goulden, 2004; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018).

Female doctoral students who are also mothers frequently encounter significant challenges in navigating their academic environments. Studies by Carter et al. (2013), Jaimes (2020), and Lynch (2008) highlighted the struggle these women face in seeking belonging within their academic programs, validating their scholarly capabilities, and balancing their identities as both mothers and scholars. This dissonance between fulfilling academic demands and maternal responsibilities can lead to increased stress and, in some cases, attrition from academic programs. Moreover, female doctoral students of color may experience additional layers of marginalization and discrimination, encountering more oppressive and dehumanizing environments in academia due to endemic racism (Gildersleeve et al., 2011).

Recent research suggests that some female doctoral students find empowerment by engaging with epistemological frameworks like Black feminism and methodological tools such as collaborative ethnography and autoethnography. These approaches enable them to challenge patriarchal assumptions about the roles of women, scholars, and mothers (Grant, 2021; Phu, 2020). However, while these studies provide valuable insights, they primarily focus on domestic students and do not fully explore the unique challenges faced by international female doctoral students who are mothers.

Academic and Career Trajectories of International Female Doctoral Students

Research specifically addressing the experiences of international female doctoral students who are mothers is sparse. Murad (2023) examined the challenges and support systems for international doctoral students with children, focusing on their academic and social engagement. Lamichhane (2023) similarly explored the experiences of female graduate students who were mothers in Australian higher education. These studies begin to address the intersection of international student status, motherhood, and academic career trajectories, but they do not delve deeply into how these factors intersect to shape the unique experiences and career paths of this group.

Gaps in Literature and Rationale for Our Study

Despite the growing body of research on female doctoral students, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the experiences of international female doctoral students who are mothers, particularly in terms of how children and family responsibilities impact their academic and career trajectories. Existing studies have largely overlooked how these women navigate the complex transitions between countries, degree programs, and varying social and academic cultures. Moreover, there is limited understanding of how their roles as mothers and caregivers influence their decision-making processes, support systems, and career motivations.

Our study aims to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of international female doctoral students who are mothers, focusing on how they make decisions and receive support at critical life-course turning points. By examining these intersections, our research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by this underrepresented group, ultimately informing policies and practices that can better support their academic and professional development.

Theoretical Perspectives

Feminist perspectives have emerged as a crucial lens for examining the specific life experiences of female graduate students, particularly in the context of their academic and career trajectories. We used feminist perspectives to investigate the academic and career trajectories of international female students who are mothers. Cook and Fonow (1986) established a foundational framework that outlines five key principles for analyzing feminism within sociology: (1) acknowledging the impact of gender on women's experiences, (2) raising awareness among women about their life transitions, (3) rejecting the objectification of women in research, (4) critically evaluating the ethical considerations of involving female participants in research, and (5) empowering women, policymakers, and activists to advocate for transformative changes in women's rights. These principles have been adapted and expanded by scholars to challenge traditional notions in qualitative research, enabling a deeper exploration of gendered experiences (Palmer et al., 2022). This feminist framework is well-suited for our study since it provides the tools necessary for a nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of gender, motherhood, and international student status. We argue that this framework is particularly relevant as it enables an exploration of how these women's identities are shaped by, and in turn shape, their academic and career trajectories in the context of systemic gendered, cultural, and institutional dynamics.

Research Methodology

The qualitative research methodology was employed to explore the nuanced experiences of women through feminist lens. For our ongoing project we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight participants at an R1 university in the Midwest United States, focusing on international doctoral students' academic and career trajectories. For this paper, we decided to focus on three female international doctoral students who are mothers. The decision to focus on three participants from the total pool of eight was driven by the desire to provide a more detailed and in-depth analysis of their unique experiences as international female doctoral students who are also mothers. By narrowing our focus, we were able to delve deeply into the specific challenges and transitions these women face, allowing for a richer narrative that captures the complexity of their academic and career trajectories. Additionally, their diverse backgrounds—from three different countries in West Africa and Central Asia—offered a valuable comparative perspective, highlighting the intersection of cultural, academic, and familial influences on their experiences. This focused approach aligns with the qualitative nature of the study, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand.

The participants in this study pursued their doctoral programs at different stages of their lives as mothers. Sophia had her child before starting her PhD, entering the program as a single mother. Olivia also had her children before beginning her doctoral studies, bringing her family with her

Table 1

Sample Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Country of Origin	Field of Study
Olivia	Female	Nigeria	Teacher Education
Sophia	Female	Ghana	Educational Psychology
Mia	Female	Kazakhstan	Educational Administration

as she transitioned into the academic environment. Mia had her children prior to pursuing her PhD, after gaining significant professional experience. Each participant entered their doctoral programs with the responsibilities of motherhood already in place.

The data analysis process involved all three research team members independently reviewing the interview transcripts to identify key themes and codes related to the participants' academic and social integration (Saldaña, 2021). To ensure consistency in coding and enhance the reliability of our analysis, the team held discussions to reach consensus on the codes for each participant's narrative. We adopted narrative analysis to examine and reconstruct the participants' experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of their unique educational and professional journeys (Jeong-Hee, 2016).

Findings

Motivations and Considerations for Career Move

For our three participants, the decision to pursue a doctoral program in the United States was influenced by a combination of personal ambitions, professional goals, and the perceived advantages of the US higher education system. Additionally, the participants' aspirations for their children's futures played a significant role in their decision-making process, making the move to the US not just a career choice but a strategic family decision.

One of the primary motivations for Olivia was her passion for teaching and the desire to influence education policy. She explained that her experience as a teacher in Nigeria led her to realize the importance of teacher education and policymaking. She was motivated by the need to "have a voice" in how education is shaped in her context, especially in a system where she observed that "people that were positioned as experts on… African schools were not African people or non-Nigerian people". Olivia's decision to pursue a Ph.D. was largely driven by her aspiration to be in the rooms "where important conversations are being had and decisions are being made"

Sophia was motivated by a lifelong ambition to become a university lecturer, a goal she had set during her undergraduate studies. Her experience working at a research center during her national service in Ghana reinforced this ambition, as she was inspired by the women researchers who "had gone to school, gotten their PhDs, and were doing serious high-level national research." This experience solidified her decision to pursue a Ph.D., as she sought to contribute to academia and inspire others in her field.

For these women, the decision to pursue a doctoral degree was deeply influenced by considerations for their children. Mia initially planned to pursue a PhD before starting a family, but her circumstances changed during her master's program when she got married and had two children. She reflected on how "with the children in the family, everything slows down," recognizing that "having a family is different." Consequently, Mia decided to delay her PhD plans, understanding that the demands of raising a family required her to reassess the timing and feasibility of furthering her academic career.

Sophia shared a similar experience, recalling that during her master's program, she didn't have a child and could "just pack my bag and go." Now, as a mother with a toddler, she acknowledged that she "just can't move around" as freely. However, Sophia saw this not as a challenge but as a blessing, emphasizing that "having a child in itself is a blessing" helps her

feel that she is "never lonely." This shift in perspective shaped her motivation for pursuing a PhD, as she embraced motherhood as an enriching aspect of her academic journey rather than an obstacle.

Olivia also made her decision with careful consideration of its impact on her children. She strategically timed her PhD to align with her children's transitions in school, such as moving from middle to high school, noting, "It felt like a good time to move" to minimize disruption to their social and educational lives. Olivia was also driven by a desire to set a positive example for her daughters, demonstrating that it is possible to pursue and achieve academic and professional goals while managing family responsibilities. Her focus on her children's future underscored her belief in the importance of being "a role model" who shows that one can "pursue what you love in different ways."

Challenges of Career Transition as Mothers

The transition into doctoral programs as mothers presented a unique set of challenges for the women interviewed, including the socio-cultural adjustment of their children, balancing academic and family responsibilities, and the physical and emotional toll of cross-cultural transitions.

One of the most significant challenges these mothers faced was helping their children adjust to a new cultural environment. Olivia shared that her oldest daughter particularly struggled with making friends and integrating into a new social setting. The move disrupted established social networks, and her daughter found it difficult to join existing friend groups, especially in a context where many peers had known each other since childhood. Olivia described the emotional difficulty of watching her child navigate this transition, explaining that "you can't follow her to school and help her talk to someone… she has to figure it out" on her own. The adjustment was further complicated by cultural differences, such as accents and backgrounds, which made the transition even more challenging for her children.

In addition to family responsibilities, balancing the demands of a rigorous academic program presented another significant challenge for the participants. Olivia described her PhD as requiring her to be "almost constantly in [her] brain space," managing an intense workload while also caring for her family. She recalled, "The first year in particular, I remember there was just so much reading… I was exhausted but also excited." Despite the support of her husband, who shared household and parenting duties, the demands of her academic workload often required long hours of study and writing, which inevitably took time away from her family.

The physical and emotional toll of cross-cultural transitions was another major challenge. Olivia spoke candidly about the mental effort required to adapt to a new cultural environment, even though she had previously lived in the United States. She noted that adjusting to the cultural nuances of a different region and academic setting was exhausting, sometimes feeling like a "performance" where she had to remain constantly vigilant about how she was perceived and whether she was adhering to unfamiliar social norms.

This emotional strain was intensified by the physical distance from her extended family and support network back in her home country. Olivia expressed how the absence of close family members, such as her parents and siblings, heightened her sense of isolation and made the adjustment period more challenging. "It's just me and my family here," she reflected,

underscoring the emotional burden of being far from home and the difficulty of building a new support system in a foreign country.

Supportive Networks and Community Engagement

Supportive networks and community engagement played a crucial role in the success of Olivia, Sophia, and Mia during their doctoral journeys. These networks provided essential emotional, academic, and practical support, helping them navigate the challenges of being international students and mothers.

In their academic environments, the participants found mentors, peers, and institutional resources vital to their success. Olivia emphasized the importance of her advisor, stating, "My advisor was really my lifeline… she was always there to guide me." Similarly, Sophia highlighted the support she received from faculty and peers at her university, who helped her find daycare and connected her with other mothers, providing both practical help and a sense of community.

Beyond academia, religious and social communities were crucial for emotional and logistical support. Mia, who faced isolation during the pandemic, relied heavily on her church community. "My church was like a second family… they were there for me when things got tough," she shared. Sophia also found strength in an African church near campus, which offered spiritual support and practical assistance, helping her manage her dual roles as a student and single mother.

International student networks provided a shared space for connection and support. Olivia found camaraderie among fellow international students, noting, "We were all in the same boat… It really helped to have people who understood exactly what I was going through." Mia echoed this sentiment, praising the international student activities at her university for offering a sense of community during challenging times.

These supportive networks were instrumental in the participants' academic and personal success. They offered practical assistance, emotional support, and a sense of belonging, which helped the participants navigate the pressures of their dual roles. As Olivia reflected, "Knowing that I wasn't alone, that there were people rooting for me, made all the difference."

Conclusion and Implications

This study sheds light on the complex and multifaceted experiences of female international doctoral students who navigate the intersecting challenges of academia and motherhood within the U.S. higher education system. The findings reveal that these women's decisions to pursue doctoral studies were not merely driven by academic and professional ambitions but were also deeply intertwined with considerations for their families, particularly their children's futures. Their journeys highlight the critical role of supportive networks—both academic and community-based—in mitigating the challenges they face, such as balancing intense academic demands with caregiving responsibilities and managing the cultural transitions their children undergo.

The implications of this study are significant for higher education institutions seeking to better support this underrepresented demographic. Universities should consider developing targeted support programs that address the unique needs of female international doctoral students who

are also mothers. Such programs could include more flexible academic schedules, enhanced childcare support, and culturally sensitive advising that takes into account the dual roles these women navigate. Furthermore, fostering strong, inclusive communities within academic institutions can provide much-needed emotional and practical support, which is crucial for the well-being and success of these students.

Additionally, this study underscores the importance of integrating feminist perspectives into the development of institutional policies and practices. By recognizing the specific challenges faced by female international doctoral students, particularly those related to gender, motherhood, and cultural transitions, universities can create more equitable and supportive environments that enable these students to thrive academically and professionally. This approach not only benefits the individual students but also enriches the academic community by fostering diverse perspectives and experiences.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on the intersectionality of gender, motherhood, and international student status, offering insights that can inform the development of more nuanced and effective support systems. By addressing the specific challenges highlighted in this study, higher education institutions can better serve this unique population, ultimately enhancing their academic experiences and professional trajectories.

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