

## **Stress Management Strategies Adopted by Postgraduate Working Mothers: Case Study of University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State**

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### **Abstract**

The paper focused on stress management strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers in University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Six research questions guided the study. It was a survey. The population for the study was 2,503 postgraduate working mothers. The sample size was 300 postgraduate working mothers drawn by convenience sampling technique. Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide were used for data collection. Data were analysed using mean. Findings of the study revealed 48 causes of stress at home, school and work place; 32 coping strategies that will help postgraduate working mothers to cope with stress at home, school and work places; as being organized, focusing at school work while at school, office work while at work and house chores and family matters while at home, among others . Among recommendations made was that postgraduate working mothers should adopt flexible working hours and maintain a balance between work and work life by scheduling work properly.

**Keywords:** Stress, Management, Strategies, Postgraduate, Working, Mothers

### **Introduction**

Stress is today a serious challenge to many people. According to Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)/World Health Organization (WHO), (2016) stress has become a world -wide epidemic and statistics has shown that stress affects

about one out of four persons (Senova & Antosova, 2014). Postgraduate working mothers are no exception as stress involve not only postgraduate working mothers but it is the problem of everyone at any level. According to Thompson, (2017) an estimated 8.2 Million American adults, about 3.4 %

of the United States (US) population suffers from serious stress. The Nigerian watch, Wednesday, 11 December, 2013 reported that as many as 75% of Nigerian workers are suffering from various forms of stress.

Stress is our body's way of responding to changes in life. Life involves constant changes (ranging from changing locations from home, to work each morning to adapting to major life changes like marriage, divorce, or death of a loved one) (Scott, 2018) there is no avoiding stress. Different writers and scholars perceive stress from different perspectives; psychological, physiological, behavioural, occupational, environmental and social (Uzoeshi, 2012). Stress is any uncomfortable 'emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological and behavioural changes (Baum, (1990) in American psychological association, 2018). According to Adamu (2011) stress is seen almost everywhere, traffic, political assembly, military parade workplace, homes, school etc.

The number of working mothers has increased and as women take up role of working as professionals, furthering their education at postgraduate level and their traditional role as home makers, they are under great stress to balance their work, academics, personal and family lives. Women pattern of life is filled with constant change and change as we know is stressful (Hobson, Kamen, Szostek, Nethercut, Tiedmann

&Wojnarowicz 1998). The authors added that the changing social structure where career women with increased responsibility at their work place and postgraduate school programmes, still have to cater for children and aging parents, carry out chores in the home, and cater for other family needs contribute to stress on women. This change is now natural and dynamic, and the biggest challenge for these women is how to balance work, academics and family life without experiencing stress (Sudha & Karthikeyan, 2014). According to Shiva (2013), professional women after working in their offices return home to cook, clean and looked after family affairs then they get tired and worn out. This makes them more stressed up and led to some challenges they face. Also, taking up a postgraduate study is stressful and no one expects postgraduate studies to be stress free. Postgraduate work is challenging on a variety of levels, stretching often excessively, the minds as well as the emotions, the stamina and the finances of individuals involved. Postgraduate education also involved the stretching of time as postgraduate students carry various and often competing roles and responsibilities each demanding time and attention (Haynes Bulosam, Citty, Grant-Harris, Hudson & Koro-Ljungberg 2012).

Postgraduate working mothers struggle to balance their academic pursuit with their work life, personal life and family responsibilities. Postgraduate working mothers

transitioning from full time employment to full time postgraduate students have also faced issues of balance (McCoy and Gardner, 2011). These result to additional stress in their lives. Stress is the latest killer. It is the cause rather than the effect of several physical, mental and emotional problems. Stress that is not well managed will bring negative consequences not only to the postgraduate working mother but also to the organization where she works, her family and performance at postgraduate level of education. Stress that is not well managed can cause emotional and physical ill health such as heart disease, lung problems, accident, committing suicide among others. When such a situation prevails, postgraduate working mothers have to face all these situations in her work place, at home and in school. Maintaining a balance between work and life becomes a tough task. One of the population that have been considered vulnerable to stress is the women population particularly women who are mothers, working and pursuing postgraduate studies. It is in view of this that this paper sought to evolve stress managements strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers at the University of Port Harcourt.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The major purpose of the study was to ascertain stress management strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers in University of Port

Harcourt, Rivers State. Specifically, the study determined:

1. causes of stress at work for postgraduate working mothers
2. causes of stress at home for postgraduate working mothers
3. causes of stress at school for postgraduate working mothers
4. stress management strategies adopted at work by postgraduate working mothers
5. stress management strategies adopted at home by postgraduate working mothers
6. stress management strategies adopted at school (postgraduate academics) by postgraduate working mothers.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the causes of stress at work for postgraduate working mothers?
2. What are the causes of stress at home for postgraduate working mothers?
3. What are the causes of stress at school for postgraduate working mothers?
4. What are the stress management strategies adopted at work by postgraduate working mothers?
5. What are the stress management strategies adopted at home by postgraduate working mothers?
6. What are the stress management strategies adopted a school by postgraduate working mother?

## **Methodology**

**Design of the Study:** The study adopted cross sectional survey research design.

**Area of the Study:** The study was carried out in The University of Port Harcourt in Rivers State. University of Port Harcourt runs a postgraduate studies (Diploma, Masters and Doctoral degrees) in all of her faculties.

**Population for the Study:** The population for the study comprised 2015/2016 postgraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt. The postgraduate students were about 2,503 (Admission Unit of the University, 2017)

**Sampling and Sampling Technique:** The sample size for the study was 300 postgraduate working mothers. Convenience sampling technique was adopted in selection of the sample for the study. This was to ensure that only postgraduate mothers who were working and can be easily reached were used in the study. A total of eight participants were purposively selected for the discussion.

**Instrument for Data Collection** The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire and focused group discussion guide (FGD). The instruments were developed based on related literature and objectives of the

study. Responses to questionnaire items were based on a 4-point rating scale of: strongly agree -4, agree -3, disagree -3 and strongly disagree -1. The instrument was face validated by three experts in the department of Home Economics and Hotel management, Faculty of Vocational Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt. The expert's inputs were used to improve the final copy of the questionnaire for the study. Cronbach Alpha method was used in determining the internal consistency of the instrument and it yielded reliability co-efficient of 0.96

**Data Collection Method:** A total of 300 copies of the instrument were distributed to the respondents. The entire three hundred copies of instrument were retrieved. One FGD session was held with eight discussants and researchers.

**Data Analysis Techniques:** The data collected for the study were analyzed using mean. Mean rating from 2.50 and above were considered as agreed while any mean less than 2.50 was considered disagreed. FGD data were summarised.

## **Findings of the Study**

**Tables 1: Mean Responses on Causes of Stress for Postgraduate Working Mothers at Work**

| S/N | Causes of Stress at work                        | Mean | Remark |
|-----|---|------|--------|
| 1.  | Work load                                       | 3.92 | Agreed |
| 2.  | Role overload                                   | 3.84 | Agreed |
| 3.  | Job insecurity                                  | 3.66 | Agreed |
| 4.  | Lack of support from supervisors/ heads of unit | 3.80 | Agreed |
| 5.  | Never receive overtime pay                      | 3.92 | Agreed |
| 6.  | Salary not paid regularly                       | 2.64 | Agreed |
| 7.  | Inadequate salary                               | 3.77 | Agreed |
| 8.  | Allowances/arrears not paid regularly           | 2.64 | Agreed |
| 9.  | Always answer query in office                   | 2.53 | Agreed |
| 10. | Tribal sentiment                                | 2.57 | Agreed |
| 11. | Work beyond working hour                        | 2.54 | Agreed |
| 12. | Inability to meet set demand                    | 2.58 | Agreed |
| 13. | Poor working condition                          | 3.54 | Agreed |
| 14. | Poor staff relationship                         | 3.25 | Agreed |
| 15. | Time pressure                                   | 3.14 | Agreed |
| 16. | Conflict with colleagues                        | 2.82 | Agreed |
| 17. | Negligent coworkers                             | 2.93 | Agreed |
| 18. | Crowded work area                               | 3.28 | Agreed |
| 19. | Extending working hours                         | 2.86 | Agreed |
| 20. | Non supportive work environment                 | 2.66 | Agreed |

Table 1 shows the mean response on causes of stress for postgraduate working mothers at work. The respondents agreed with all the causes of stress at work as their means are above the cutoff point of 2.5 and above.

**Focus Group Discussion also reveals the following causes of stress at work for postgraduate working mothers.**

- High work load
- Psychological problem to balance family and workload
- Going early to work and coming back late

**Tables 2: Mean Responses on Causes of Stress for Postgraduate Working Mothers at School**

| S/N | Causes of Stress at school             | Mean | Remark    |
|-----|--|------|-----------|
| 1.  | Curriculum and instruction             | 3.73 | Agreed    |
| 2.  | Team work                              | 2.33 | Disagreed |
| 3.  | Daily class work                       | 3.04 | Agreed    |
| 4.  | Group assignment                       | 2.44 | Disagreed |
| 5.  | Handling class work                    | 2.61 | Agreed    |
| 6.  | Amount of material to study            | 3.30 | Agreed    |
| 7.  | Too many assignment given by lecturers | 3.49 | Agreed    |
| 8.  | Too many seminar presentations         | 3.01 | Agreed    |

|   |      |           |
|---|------|-----------|
| 9. Competition with other students                | 2.29 | Disagreed |
| 10. Poor relationship with other students         | 2.86 | Agreed    |
| 11. Poor relationship with lecturers              | 2.80 | Agreed    |
| 12. Inadequate time to complete assignment        | 3.41 | Agreed    |
| 13. Studying for test and exams                   | 2.69 | Agreed    |
| 14. Grade competition among classmates            | 2.97 | Agreed    |
| 15. Large amount of content to master             | 3.62 | Agreed    |
| 16. Over crowded lecture hall                     | 3.57 | Agreed    |
| 17. Semester system                               | 2.48 | Disagreed |
| 18. Inadequate resources to perform academic work | 3.49 | Agreed    |
| 19. Fear of failing                               | 3.44 | Agreed    |
| 20. Lagging behind                                | 3.41 | Agreed    |

Table 2 shows the mean response on causes of stress for postgraduate working mothers at school. The respondents agreed with 16 out of 20 causes identified. They all have the cut-off point of 2.5 and above while only item 2, 4, 9 and 17 fell below the cut-off point.

**Focus Group Discussion (FGD) also reveals the following causes of stress**

**at school for postgraduate working mothers.**

- Distance
- Staying long hours in school against proposed hours
- Offering more courses
- Fixing lectures and finishing late
- Clashes of courses
- Plenty of assignment and reading materials

**Tables 3: Mean Responses on Causes of Stress for Postgraduate Working Mothers at Home**

| S/N | Causes of Stress at home                 | Mean | Remark |
|-----|--|------|--------|
| 1.  | Change in family members health          | 3.86 | Agreed |
| 2.  | Death of spouse/family members           | 3.94 | Agreed |
| 3.  | Violence at home                         | 3.84 | Agreed |
| 4.  | Marital conflict                         | 3.81 | Agreed |
| 5.  | Divorce/marital separation               | 3.62 | Agreed |
| 6.  | Troubles with in-laws                    | 3.40 | Agreed |
| 7.  | Conflict or violence in community        | 3.30 | Agreed |
| 8.  | Anxiety when not at home                 | 3.37 | Agreed |
| 9.  | Poor mother –children relationship       | 3.12 | Agreed |
| 10. | Child care challenges                    | 3.21 | Agreed |
| 11. | Parenting challenges                     | 3.06 | Agreed |
| 12. | Poor communication with spouse           | 3.78 | Agreed |
| 13. | Family separation due to work and school | 3.41 | Agreed |
| 14. | Personal commitment                      | 3.25 | Agreed |
| 15. | Social engagement                        | 3.49 | Agreed |
| 16. | House work is disorganized               | 3.69 | Agreed |

|  |      |        |
|--|------|--------|
| 17. Son or daughter leaving home for school        | 3.32 | Agreed |
| 18. Do not know nor monitor activities of children | 2.93 | Agreed |
| 19. Change (decline) of living condition           | 3.68 | Agreed |
| 20. Physical relocation due to housing change      | 3.12 | Agreed |
| 21. Need for extra income                          | 3.76 | Agreed |
| 22. Unexpected or unwanted transfer                | 3.17 | Agreed |

Table 3 shows the mean response on causes of stress for postgraduate working mothers at home. The respondents agreed with all the causes of stress at home as their means are above the cutoff point of 2.5 and above.

**Focus Group Discussion (FGD) also reveals the following causes of stress**

**at home for postgraduate working mothers.**

- Fulfilling husband emotional needs.
- Attending to children and their home work
- Lack of stable financial income
- Going to market, cooking and washing

**Tables 4: Mean Responses on Stress Management Strategies Adopted by Postgraduate Working Mothers at Work**

| S/N | Stress management strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers at work | Mean | Remark |
|-----|--|------|--------|
| 1.  | Recognize warning signals (self-awareness)                                   | 3.97 | Agreed |
| 2.  | Keep positive attitude at all-time   | 3.97 | Agreed |
| 3.  | Plan instead of responding to pressure                                       | 3.94 | Agreed |
| 4.  | Set attainable/ personal goal  | 3.93 | Agreed |
| 5.  | Prioritize task  | 3.86 | Agreed |
| 6.  | Effective time management  | 3.94 | Agreed |
| 7.  | zCreate a balanced schedule  | 3.89 | Agreed |
| 8.  | Adopt a new way of life  | 3.41 | Agreed |
| 9.  | Maintain a positive outlook on life  | 3.81 | Agreed |
| 10. | Institutional support (vacation leave, maternity leave, sick leave)          | 3.70 | Agreed |

Table 4 shows the mean response on stress management strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers. The respondents agreed with all the 10 ways identified. They all have the cut- off point of 2.5 and above.

**Tables 5: Mean Responses on Stress Management Strategies adopted by Postgraduate Working Mothers at School**

| S/N | Stress management strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers at school | Mean | Remark    |
|-----|--|------|-----------|
| 1.  | Be reasonably organized  | 3.52 | Agreed    |
| 2.  | Learn to say no  | 3.00 | Agreed    |
| 3.  | Socialize and connect with others  | 2.66 | Agreed    |
| 4.  | Do not be a perfectionist  | 3.22 | Agreed    |
| 5.  | Make a list of priorities  | 3.57 | Agreed    |
| 6.  | Focus at school work while at school   | 3.70 | Agreed    |
| 7.  | Procrastinate school work  | 2.26 | Disagreed |
| 8.  | Avoid unnecessary discussion/distraction                                       | 3.70 | Agreed    |
| 9.  | Make adequate plan for daily work schedule                                     | 3.81 | Agreed    |

Table 5 shows the mean response on stress management strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers at school. The respondents agreed with 8 out of 9 ways identified. They all have the cut-off point of 2.5 and above while only item 7 fell below the cut-off point.

**Tables 6: Mean Responses on Stress Management Strategies Adopted by Postgraduate Working Mother's at Home**

| S/N | Stress management strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers at home | Mean | Remark    |
|-----|--|------|-----------|
| 1.  | Eat a proper diet  | 3.84 | Agreed    |
| 2.  | Develop and maintain a regular exercise programme                            | 3.78 | Agreed    |
| 3.  | Look for humour  | 3.46 | Agreed    |
| 4.  | Use tranquilizers/drugs  | 2.26 | Disagreed |
| 5.  | Depend on alcohol and smoking  | 2.37 | Disagreed |
| 6.  | Confide in close friend  | 2.56 | Agreed    |
| 7.  | Take it out on family members  | 2.34 | Disagreed |
| 8.  | Get house-helps  | 2.69 | Agreed    |
| 9.  | Balance work and life by spending time with family members                   | 3.81 | Agreed    |
| 10. | Adequate rest/sleep  | 3.85 | Agreed    |
| 11. | Entertainment/music/   | 3.56 | Agreed    |
| 12. | Delegate house chores to older family members                                | 3.70 | Agreed    |
| 13. | Enjoy cultural, spiritual and social activities                              | 3.54 | Agreed    |
| 14. | Go for medical checkup regularly   | 3.50 | Agreed    |
| 15. | Maintain healthy relationship with people around you                         | 3.60 | Agreed    |
| 16. | Make use of labour saving devices  | 3.81 | Agreed    |

Table 6 shows the mean response on stress management strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers at home. The respondents agreed with 13 out of 16 ways identified. They all have the cut-off point of 2.5 and



above while only item 4, 5 and 7 fell below the cut-off point (See Table 6).

**Focus Group Discussion (FGD) also reveals the following stress management strategies adopted by postgraduate working mothers at home, work and school.**

- ❖ Make earlier plans for the day
- ❖ Use services of house helps at home
- ❖ Share house chores among grown up children
- ❖ Make out time to have enough sleep
- ❖ Official work should be done at the office when due to avoid working under pressure.
- ❖ Do not carry office work home.
- ❖ At work organizations should employ more man power to reduce work over load
- ❖ Organizations should organize seminars on how to cope with stress
- ❖ Proper time management
- ❖ Friendly relationship between colleague, co-students and lecturers
- ❖ Team work with colleagues and co-students
- ❖ At school time table should be adhere to
- ❖ If there is any change on time table, notification should be done on time.
- ❖ Listen to music, watch comedy and read newspapers to relax one self.

**Discussion on Findings**

The study revealed that postgraduate working mothers experience stress at work, school and at home. The respondents agreed with all the causes of stress at work as shown in Table 1. Work load, role overload, inadequate

salary, allowances not paid regularly, and poor staff relationship as the highest rating. These findings is in line with the observation made by Emodi, Adesope, Albert and Nwokoma (2012) that stress is as a result of work over load, inadequate remuneration. In the same vein, Loo See and Leap-Han (2012) also noted that work over load; poor working condition and conflict among co-workers can result to job stress. Legg (2016) observed that feeling discriminated can result to long term stress. FGD revealed high work load, Psychological problem to balance family and workload as well as going early to work and coming back late as causes of job stress. Gadazi, Mobeen and Gardazi (2016) also noted that a lot of working mothers leave home early for work and work over time without pay. This also adds to stress up most working mothers.

On the causes of stress at school (academic stress), the respondents agreed with 16 out of the 20 items as causes of academic stress as shown in Table 3. However, curriculum and instruction, daily class work, too many assignment, too many seminar presentation, inadequate time to complete assignment, large amount of content to study and master, inadequate resources to perform academic work, fear of failing and lagging behind has the highest mean rating as shown in Table 3. This is in line with the findings of Nandamuri and Gowthami (2013) who observed that curriculum and instruction, daily

class work, group assignment and placement activity are sources of academic stress to students though he noted that curriculum and instruction form the basis for academic activities as no institution or course can fulfill the academic requirement without the predetermined curriculum and structured instruction. Hence, class work is an integral part of any academic endeavor. The author also noted other academic stressors as fear of failing and lagging behind as well as large amount of content to study and regularly attending classes. In the same vein, Wolfenden (2011) noted that academic pressure, deadlines among others bring about the feeling of stress. Focus group discussion (FGD) also revealed that distance, Staying long hours in school against proposed hours, offering more courses, Fixing lectures and finishing late, clashes of courses, plenty of assignment and reading materials are causes of stress at school. This finding did not come as a surprise because most postgraduate students come from distant places for their study. They also stay long hours in class against proposed hour with plenty of assignment and reading to be done. Table 3 revealed that respondents agreed with all the items as causes of stress for postgraduate working mothers at home. Change in family member health, death of spouse/family member, violence at home, marital conflict, poor communication with spouse, need for extra income, change of living

condition, house work being disorganized, trouble with in-laws, and divorce/separation has the highest rating as shown in table 4. This is in line with the findings of National Mental Health Association (2005) that noted that the loss of a loved one is life most stressful event as almost every loss, no matter how expected, will be accompanied by stress and disorientation. In the same vein, Miller (2015) noted that the death of a loved one in itself is extremely stressful. There is also the stress of restructuring one's life which has been one -way and now have changed. According to Vitelli, (2015), bereavement of a loved one is a major source of life stress that often leaves people vulnerable to later problems such as depression, chronic stress and reduced life expectancy. Scott, (2016) observed that the proportion of people stressed about money is on the increase as every seven out of ten respondents are very stressed about money. In the same vein Leggs, (2016) noted that the death of a loved one, changing jobs, moving houses and sending a child off to college are life changes that can be stressful. He further noted that financial trouble is a common source of stress. FGD also revealed lack of stable financial income, fulfilling husband emotional needs, attending to children and their homework, going to market, cooking and washing as causes of stress at home.

The study reveals that the respondents supported the idea of recognizing warning signals (self-

awareness), keeping positive attitude at all times, plan instead of responding to pressure, effective time management, prioritize task as stress management strategies at work. This is in consonance with Scott (2016) who noted that self-awareness, developing stress relieving habits among others are ways of coping with stress. In the same vein, Anyakoha, (2015); Kadiravan & Kumar (2012) observed that keeping positive attitude, being assertive, regular exercise, time management, getting enough rest and sleep without relying on alcohol and drugs are ways stress could be managed at home. These are effective tools against stress and approaching things from a positive perspective can be a good way to minimize the effect stress has on students. This is because a person's attitude about a situation, not the situation itself that results in stress. Also, regular exercise also have positive effect on ones susceptibility to stress, as it enhances confidence, self-esteem and makes less tense and more at ease. Sonye (2013) also observed that the use of competent house helps, delegation of duties to family members are ways stress could be coped with. This is because keeping problems hidden away inside only make stress work. FGD also revealed that making earlier plans for the day, using services of house helps at home, Sharing house chores among grown up children, making out time to have enough sleep are ways to cope with stress. This is because going to bed early and getting 7-8 hours of sleep

each day will result in students being less anxious, more relaxed, more energetic and more focused the next day. FGD also revealed that doing official work at the office when due to avoid working under pressure and not carrying official work home are also ways to cope with stress.

Table 5 also revealed that postgraduate working mothers can cope with stress at work place if organizations will employ more man power to reduce work over load, organize seminars on how to cope with stress, Proper time management, Friendly relationship between colleague, co-students and lecturers. Team work with colleagues and co-students, at school time table should be adhere to, If there is any change on time table, notification should be done on time, Listen to music, watch comedy and read newspapers to relax one self.

### **Conclusion**

This study has shown that postgraduate working mothers in University of Port Harcourt experience stress at home, school and work and they have adopted different coping strategies to manage the stress they experience at home, school and work place.

### **Recommendation**

The following recommendations were made based on the research findings

- ❖ Postgraduate students should share house/personal work with family members and official work with subordinates at work place.

- ❖ Break should be given between working hours at school, work and home with light refreshment to overcome physical and mental tiredness
- ❖ Postgraduate students should adopt flexible working hours
- ❖ They should maintain a complete work life balance by scheduling work properly.
- ❖ Postgraduate working mothers should follow management concept strictly to ease time pressure.
- ❖ Organizations can support women by given vacation leave, study leave, sick leave and maternity leave.
- ❖ The school can also support by going on break after each semester

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