

**Gender, Power, and Experiences of Female International Graduate Students Who Are
Mothers in U.S. Institutions**

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Gender, Power, and Experiences of Female International Graduate Students Who Are Mothers in U.S. Institutions

The unique barriers faced by female international graduate students who are mothers (FIGSMs) affect their general well-being, mental health, and academic achievement, which in turn affect their children's well-being. The purpose of this study is to identify the gaps in existing research concerning this academic population, analyze the barriers they encounter, and present best practices that U.S. universities can employ to serve these students better. The study uses a qualitative research methodology drawing on semi-structured interviews and a focus group with FIGSMs from colleges in the United States. The results show that many FIGSMs have poor mental health due to interconnected social determinants, such as financial hardship related to immigration restrictions, academic challenges compounded by a lack of access to resources and events by international students with families, and social and cultural isolation exacerbated by large workloads and demanding reproductive labor. Based on FIGSMs' reconceptualization of gender roles, the dissertation discusses the positive difference that improved university policies, programs, and practices geared toward their reality will make. By tackling the diverse obstacles encountered by FIGSMs, U.S. universities can cultivate a more inclusive and supportive learning environment and better ensure the success of these valuable students.

Keywords: Female international graduate students, children, F1 student visa, F2 dependent visa, academic challenges, financial strain, support systems, U.S. universities, cultural sensitivity, immigration barriers, social determinants of mental health

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, international students attending universities in the United States include members of previously underrepresented groups. These include female students from non-western industrialized nations, some of whom are mothers. This qualitative study investigates the experiences of previously underrepresented female international graduate students who are mothers (FIGSMs) in US institutions to learn more about the immigration, social, economic, and academic conditions of their lives. The research provides insights for improving higher education practices and policies to better ensure the success of FIGSMs.

According to the Institute of International Education (2023), “international student enrollment increased across all academic levels in 2022/23,” with graduate student enrollment increasing the most; 467,027 international students were pursuing master’s, doctorate, or professional degrees (+21%).” Additionally, “Sub-Saharan Africa had the highest rate of growth in immigrant population among world regions, growing by 18 percent,” and for the first time, Ghana and Nigeria were amongst the top 25 places of origin for international students.

According to the Assistant Secretary of State, Lee Satterfield, the growth in international students from sub-Saharan countries “is the fastest growth rate in more than 40 years” (Institute of International Education, 2023). US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2021) reported that “Forty-four percent (548,705) of F-1 and M-1 international students in the calendar year 2021 were female, while 56 percent (687,534) were male.” Of international students seeking doctoral degrees in 2021, 40% (76,394) were female; for the top 10 countries of citizenship, the average female enrollment was 44.5% (380,062), and the average male enrollment was 55.5% (473,960) (US Immigration & Customs Enforcement, 2021).

Despite an extensive online search using Google Scholar and the key terms “female international graduate student” and “international graduate student mothers” I was unable to identify prevalence data specifically for female international graduate students who are mothers. Data from the University of Oregon shows that of the approximately 3,000 graduate students enrolled in 2023, 542 (18.1%) were international students, 68 (12.5%) of whom had dependents. Of these international graduate students, 53.69% were women and almost half (26%) of them are FIGSMs. FIGSMs are an important population to study because insights into the barriers they face and a consideration for their resilient strategies for overcoming these barriers when fully integrated into the practices and policies of US institutions could benefit FIGSMs as well as all graduate students.

Positionality

My own positionality informs my choice of topic and commitment to this research. I was born and raised in Ghana. I have always dreamed of getting a graduate degree outside of Ghana, and I had that chance when I moved to the US in 2011. I have been in graduate school at a US institution pursuing my master’s and doctoral degrees since 2018. I gave birth to my two sons, now school-age, before starting my first graduate degree. Like many FIGSMs, I am pursuing full-time study while also serving as the primary parent to my children. As with other FIGSMs, I face barriers unique to us that I continuously have to develop strategies to overcome. I am fortunate that I now have US citizenship, which means I am no longer vulnerable to immigration and related economic barriers that confront FIGSMs in the US on visas that are contingent on their student status. It is important to me to recognize the unique experiences and potential similarities and differences between myself and my study population.

I also have professional insights and networks that inform this study because of my role as an advisor in the Global Engagement office of the University of Oregon. I have the support of my office to conduct this study and to design and implement practices, programs, and policies informed by my study findings. A critical part of this dissertation is a consideration of applying research for practice and the implications of FIGSMs' challenges to enable more effective and equitable university-wide support and programming.

Although my study focuses on FIGSMs in general, there is very little, if any, research that includes African female graduate students. For this reason, I oversampled African female graduate students in my study. My goal is to identify and integrate potential unique social determinants that influence the learning of Africans, as well as any female graduate student from nations other than those that are Western and industrialized, into my findings to better equip US universities to support such students' needs.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

In this study, I focus on social determinants—defined here as the conditions of life that shape one’s ability to learn well and the challenges that hinder success (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024)—that affect female international graduate students’ academic learning in US institutions and consider the implications of their experiences, including their experiences as parents, to improve practices, programs, and policies geared toward them in US universities. Figure 1 represents my mapping of these social determinants of learning (SDOL) to better identify policy and program changes that would help reduce or eliminate barriers to this student population in U.S. institutions and, thereby, better ensure their success.

Figure 1

Social Determinants of Learning

Social Determinants of Health



Social Determinants of Health
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Healthy People 2030

Note: (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024)

I discuss the literature regarding the social determinants presented in the figure and then tie them to how female international graduate students with children experience immigration and acculturation, social, economic, and academic spheres. Students' experiences as mothers cut across all of these domains, and therefore, I consider family factors at the end of each section. As there are substantial gaps in the literature on FIGSMs, I provide examples of FIGSMs' challenges and strategies based on anecdotal evidence where relevant.

Physical Health

A university's provision of health insurance relates to physical health. Health insurance ensures that FIGSMs stay as healthy as possible so they can learn quickly and well and ideally finish on time. Yet FIGSMs often experience health provider bias, which can influence the quality of healthcare provided to them and their ability to heal, thus affecting their ability to learn (Tang et al., 2018). Universities can support FIGSMs by putting programs in place to ensure their physical health is supported throughout their studies.

Psychosocial Health

Psychosocial health refers to a student's sense of self and ability to be resilient. Attaining education is highly dependent on a student's emotional and psychological endurance. If left untreated, FIGSMs' mental health symptoms can adversely influence how they navigate societal norms and structures that affect their educational performance and employment capacity (Alegría et al., 2018).

Social Environment

Social environment refers to conditions that promote a student's sense of belonging and community (Muller et al., 2022). It relates to the extent to which higher education institutions

recognize the barriers facing FIGSMs and create policies and practices that eliminate inequities and strengthen access to the educational community.

Economic Stability

Economic stability is the social determinant that addresses a person's generational poverty, job security, and the number of hours they need to work while pursuing their degree in order to support themselves and their families. Higher education institutions can create flexibility in programs that allow working students to achieve their academic goals without compromising their families' financial stability.

Physical Environment

Physical environment focuses on factors that affect a student's quality of life in a community and their ability to perform routine everyday functions. These factors could include internet and Wi-Fi access, neighborhood safety, environmental conditions in the home (e.g., mold, mildew, pests), and housing stability (Muller et al., 2022).

Self-motivation

Self-motivation reflects students' motivation to learn, think critically, stay focused, and even make safe life choices (Misra et al., 2003; Stan & Plaiasu, 2019). Universities need to consider self-motivation as necessary for student success and retention. Students' strengths and skills often decrease when not recognized and instead seen through a deficit lens, thereby diminishing self-motivation. An example is a student who is strong in British English writing but is assessed by U.S. English standards and told their language skills are sub-par, requiring remedial coursework. This experience, which is common in the lives of graduate students from former British colonies, can affect a student's self-esteem and be demotivating (Sanderson et al., 2021).

Consideration for Immigration and Acculturation Factors

FIGSMs' experiences with the U.S. immigration system and acculturating to life in the United States can be stressful, with important implications for FIGSMs' ability to succeed in graduate school.

U.S. administrations and related federal policies can have a large influence on the ability of international graduate students to attend a U.S. university. Some of these immigration challenges have existed for decades. The terrorist attack on September 11th not only affected the people who lost their lives and their families, but international students as well. Prior to the attack, the United States immigration system was not as strict with visa requirements as became after the attack. For example, an international student from a country in central Asia discovered upon arriving in the U.S. that she was pregnant. As the J1 visa requirement for her country only allowed one family member, she had to choose between her husband joining her in the United States or carrying her pregnancy to term because the fetus counted as her family member. As a graduate student, she faced a barrier that no other student in her program encountered: navigating a new graduate program in a new country alone while pregnant. Further, imagine how much more difficult her experience would have been if her advisor, upon learning that she was pregnant, had reacted with disappointment because of potential delays in her completion date related to becoming a new parent (Lobnibe (2013)). The student was determined to complete her degree as a single mother in the United States and created a community that supported her to achieve this goal. Her experience raises questions about the extent to which U.S. universities can provide more information and greater advocacy in relation to immigration provisions and the resources needed to overcome barriers related to these provisions. Because immigration law is

federal, too often FIGSMs are told there is nothing the university can do when they seek help with immigration challenges.

Acculturation is a description of cultural and psychosocial processes associated with adjusting to life in a new place. Though it is described as bi-directional, the reality often involves tremendous assimilation pressure—for immigrants who have to adjust their native languages, cultural practices and lifeways to embrace dominant modes of their new communities. The stress of this adaptation process can take a toll on the health and wellbeing of immigrant newcomers (Berry, 2005).

According to Kashubeck-West and Sullivan (2015) in “The Interplay of International Students’ Acculturative Stress, Social Support, and Acculturation Modes,” FIGSMs feel the effects of language barriers, immersion in a new culture, and lack of familiarity with U.S. academic systems. In their study, they found that FIGSMs with lowest levels of social support reported significantly higher levels of acculturative stress. They also discuss the pressure for international students to quickly adjust to the United States and how that becomes a source of added stress (Kashubeck-West & Sullivan, 2015).

Ward et al. (2001) provided a broader perspective on the acculturation of FIGSMs. They discuss the stress of acculturation as a whole family affair—the whole family experiences the stress of moving to a new country and culture. Families manage stress in diverse ways; however, they cannot manage optimally as long as even one member of that system remains depressed, scapegoated, demoralized, somaticized, or immobilized in any other way.

Economic Factors

The two main ideas I will explore here relate to the financial pressures FIGSM may feel in relation to family of origin and the financial responsibilities FIGSM have in the United States. Both have implications for a students' time, money, energy, and ability to meet their graduate school expectations. FIGSMs often have financial difficulties due to several factors, including cost of housing, childcare and providing basic needs such as food, medical and clothing, and taking care of financial obligations in their home countries. The unanticipated high costs of living in the United States can conflict with expectations that student stipends will be a new reliable source of financial stability for family back home. Additional financial pressures on FIGSM that can cause psychosocial stress relate to FIGSMs' extended families making financial sacrifices for the students. FIGSMs take on extended family responsibilities and feel guilt when they are unable to meet these responsibilities (Maust-Manucha, 2021; Muruthi et al., 2017).

FIGSM are mostly graduate employees (GEs) who must maintain full-time student status to remain eligible for tuition benefits. This is in addition to the immigration requirement to register for full-time academic work to keep their student status. This means that FIGSM take on full-time coursework and full-time parenting and then 16-20 hours a week of GE work. By law, FIGSMs can only work 20 hours a week to support their families. In most cases, these students do not have their spouses in the United States with them, and even if they were in the country, some dependent visas do not allow spouses to work leading to loss of professional identity and damage to their long-term career prospects (Bordolsi, 2015).

Although cultural reasons sometimes prevent spouses from joining their FIGSM partners, such as the man maintaining head of household status, the inability to legally work is one of the main reasons some spouses decide to stay in their home countries where they can

work to support their family member in graduate school. As a result of these requirements, many FIGSM must return to full-time schoolwork and part-time graduate employment right after delivering their baby, a stark contrast to their American counterparts (Haitova, 2023).

Academic and Social Factors

Women often pursue graduate studies to strengthen their identity, self-worth, and professional careers that go beyond traditional expectations of being a mother and a wife. Women's social experiences within and outside universities can contribute to feelings of belonging or exclusion that challenge their self-confidence. FIGSM encounter academic challenges that can affect their ability to succeed in graduate programs (Misra et al., 2003). For instance, some international students are not familiar with Western academic institutions' ways of conducting scholarly research and critically evaluating source material as well as citing sources correctly (Shane et al., 2020). This can cause first-year FIGSM to be accused of unintentional plagiarism, not because they do not understand the topic, but because they are unfamiliar with the Western style of writing (Simpson, 2016).

Thus, different cultural expectations may influence FIGSMs' ability to engage with instructors and consequently result in academic challenges. For instance, some students come from cultures where they come from a culture that give utmost respect and obedience to a person in authority, especially if the person is an elder (Simpson, 2016). One notable example is not making eye contact or raising hands to ask questions when people of authority are speaking; whereas in most western cultures, asking questions and making eye contact signifies the student is actively listening and showing respect to the elder. Therefore, a student may not understand classroom materials, yet may not feel comfortable asking the instructor for clarification, and hence may resort to academic dishonesty. FIGSMs face challenges in expressing themselves to

faculty, and it is harder for students whose first language is not English, which can sometimes cause international students to disengage in class (Maust-Manuch, 2021; Simpson, 2016).

Many of the challenges students face are not due to their personal behaviors and attitudes but instead are largely due to institutional structure and policies that place extra burdens on these students (Lobnibe, 2013). For example, the process of English testing for international students from English-speaking countries in itself can be aversive and expose blind spots in the American education system of English speaking and comprehension appraisal. When language assessments are aversive and stressful, they can undermine a student's academic confidence, self-esteem, even their identity if English is part of their sense of self. Language assessments should be strengths-based, not deficit-focused, to accurately appraise a student's ability and identify their strengths in English as well how the institution can support them to expand their language skills.

For instance, when I attended new student orientation at my university, I was told to go to the testing center to take the English (for international students) and math proficiency exams required of all undergraduates. I was not informed that the start of my college life was going to depend on these tests. My 14-month-old was with a babysitter, and I had to get him by a certain time, so I rushed through the test. I completed one of the three Academic English for International Students (AEIS) required courses and tested out of two courses because one of the writing teachers intervened. I later discovered writing classes offered through the university's multicultural center that international students thrived in because they were student-centered and relationship-oriented. Many institutions have started putting measures in place to assist students with diverse backgrounds and experiences. The problem has not been fully resolved, but providing classes purposely created for international students is a step in the right direction.

U.S. ways of speaking, writing, and reading English are particular to the U.S. and may not reflect systems from other English-speaking systems (e.g., British, European, other countries around the world). An inaccurate assessment due to the cultural bias of U.S. assessments can cost international students time and money on English language classes they are required to take because their language skills are deemed insufficient to perform graduate-level work. Considering that most FIGSMs pursued their previous education in another country, and they are often unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system, FIGSMs may feel lost at times in classes because they do not know popular culture references or colloquialisms or have trouble following class discussions on topics related to American history, education, and politics (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017).

Additional challenges for FIGSMs include having children in an educational system that they themselves are not familiar with. This is important to me because as an immigrant parent with children in K-12, my experience interacting with schools has been frustrating and, often, overwhelming. There is always the sense that a child who speaks languages other than English is treated as almost pathological: maybe the child (who, by the way, was born in the United States and speaks fluent English) suddenly is perceived as *perhaps having a language barrier*. Then, other times, there is the surprised response, *he speaks and reads English so well*. Thus, at a very tender age, our boy learned and internalized the fact that he is not only *different* because of his skin color but also because of his parents' heritage, and the fact that he speaks other languages. With the sense of *I'm different* often comes a feeling of, *Why am I weird?* This causes children of FIGSMs to experience social isolation and challenges meeting friends in schools, which can cause stress to FIGSMs (Garcia, 2019)

There are ongoing disconnects between my child's experiences at home and at school. At school, he was bored and getting into trouble for refusing to do work he already knew or completing his work on time and then disrupting other students. This resulted in multiple referrals, which I later discovered created permanent records in his student file. After trying numerous strategies to understand what was happening in his classroom, including volunteering in his kindergarten class, speaking to former principals, reading materials, and having discussions in my academic and social circles, I finally understood the biases my child was facing in a predominantly white school. I eventually advocated for my son to be assessed for Talented and Gifted (TAG), and that solved the puzzle.

The challenges that come with this might include wrongfully identifying children of FIGSMs as English Language Learners (ELLs), requiring behavioral referrals, and underestimating the children's academic abilities. Such challenges are related to FIGSMs' inadequate knowledge of the U.S. K-12 processes, the implication of referrals, and how to advocate for their children's academic needs while pursuing their own academic degrees. Their children's psychosocial struggles related to race and identity in schools further compound the stresses. Therefore, some immigrant parents, like me, study education and hope to be agents of change, starting with the schools their children attend and their own small communities.

The realities of FIGSMs' lives should be acknowledged, and they should be given equitable support to achieve and an equal chance to fulfill expectations. The expectations of graduate work are fair overall and serve as important objectives for graduate students to strive for. However, for FIGSMs to have an equal shot at reaching those goals, they need more support specifically designed to address their unique barriers.

In conclusion, why does it matter that U.S. institutions treat international students who are mothers better? A concern for equity means providing what students need and not just providing all students the same thing. The needs of female international graduate students with children differ from the needs of American students. When institutions invest in the success of international female graduate students, the ripple effect can be massive in terms of the social, political, and economic contributions of women around the globe who earn graduate degrees from Europe or the USA. A review of the literature combined with my personal and professional experiences as an international student advisor at a major public university provide the motivation for my study. The experiences of women with children when they study abroad can be uniquely difficult and transformative in both positive and negative ways. This study focuses on identifying the traumatizing parts and creating transformative experiences and pathways for international female graduate students with children.

I focus on the programs, policies, and practices in the U.S. graduate education system that could be improved to better support the growth of FIGSMs by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the supports, opportunities, and barriers for international female graduate students with children studying at U.S. institutions of higher education in relation to the following domains: social and cultural roles, economic, immigration, and academic challenges?

RQ2. What are the impacts of the social, immigration, economic, and academic supports, opportunities, and barriers for international female graduate students' children?

RQ3. What are the implications for policy, practice, and services in U.S. institutions of higher education of the social, immigration, economic, and academic supports, opportunities, and barriers experienced by international female graduate students with children and their children?

Chapter III

Methods

Specific Aims/Study Objectives

The specific aims of the study are to determine the critical immigration, social, economic, and academic challenges confronted by international female graduate students with children attending U.S. universities. This study also aims to identify the existing supports and opportunities for international female graduate students who are mothers.

Method, Materials, and Analysis

This qualitative study involved eight semi-structured interviews, a brief sociodemographic interview, and follow-up member check meetings with participants, followed by interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Tuffour, 2017). The IPA involved my identification of explicit and implicit meanings, comparing qualitative and sociodemographic (descriptor) data, and exploring areas of convergence and divergence within the data. I used a five-step process: 1) coding transcripts for key ideas; 2) creating an operationalized coding framework; 3) reviewing transcripts a second time using the coding framework and updating accordingly; 4) identifying emerging themes across all transcripts to examine saturation and convergence across groups; and 5) articulating and member checking key themes (Charmaz, 2006). Some of the strengths of IPA are the emphasis on participants' descriptions of their own experiences as well as my own reflection on the lenses through which I perceive and interpret their experiences. My goal is to give voice to the experiences of the participants, followed by iterative and thorough interpretation of their narratives (Tuffour, 2017).

Research Population and Recruitment Methods.

The research population consists of eight interviewees who are international female graduate students and mothers currently attending U.S. institutions of higher education. I used convenience sampling to recruit participants, inviting individuals identified through my personal and professional networks as well as those of previously recruited participants. I sent a recruitment email to my existing contacts that provided an initial overview of the study and invited potential participants to contact me for more information. A staff member in the University of Oregon (UO) International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) office also sent out an email with information about the study and an invitation to participate. Prospective participants then contacted me to schedule interview sessions. As my research focuses on adults, the recruitment email, consent forms, and scripts specify that “to participate you must be 18 years or older.” To be eligible for the study, prospective participants had to identify as a graduate student, have the status of an “international” student with F1 student visa, and be a mother whose children currently live with her in the United States.

Informed Consent Process

The study had a verbal consent procedure originally suggested by the UO Institutional Review Board. As all interviews took place on ZOOM, I read aloud the consent script to each participant at the start of the interview and asked her if she agreed to participate. The verbal consent script includes the following “Do you agree to participate?” and “Is it ok if I audio record the interview?” The verbal consent script informs participants that their participation in the study is voluntary; no individual is coerced to participate in the study. Upon the participant’s verbal consent, I began the recorded interview.

Provisions for Participants' Privacy and Data Confidentiality

All study participants were asked to respond to a brief sociodemographic survey as well as the semi-structured interview questions. All demographic data were collected anonymously; the demographic questionnaires did not contain participants' names or any identifying information, although demographic information was included in Dedoose, a mixed-methods software package used for data analysis. These sociodemographic data, however, were never linked with participants' personally identifying information, such as name or email.

Participants' responses to semi-structured interview questions were recorded with their permission, and the identities of participants were kept anonymous through my reference to abbreviations (S1 to S8) in lieu of their names. Recordings, transcriptions, and notes were stored on the University of Oregon server accessible only to me via password protected computers.

Potential Research Risks of Discomfort to Participants

Potential risks to participants were minimal. Minor psychological discomfort might have occurred as participants reflected on demographic survey items or responded to semi-structured interview questions or survey questions. I minimized potential risks by reminding participants that they could choose not to comment on any interview or survey questions that they felt uncomfortable responding to. They also could discontinue their participation at any time without any consequences.

Potential Benefits of the Research

Study participants received compensation in the form of gift cards (\$50 for first semi-structured interviews and \$50 for focus groups and member checking), which came from the UO

College of Education grant I received in support of my dissertation research. Study participants contributed to advancing my knowledge about how to improve the academic and social experiences of female international graduate students with children in U.S. institutions of higher learning.

Participants

All eight participants are female international graduate students who are mothers (FIGSMs). They had between one and four children, ranging from 1 to 18 years old. Three FIGSMs had children ages 14-18; five had children ages 0-10; one had children between the ages of 11-13; and one had two children ages 0-10 and 14-18. Regarding FIGSMs' nationalities, one participant was from China, two were from Nigeria, one was from Kenya, one was from Ethiopia, two were from Ghana, and one was from Gabon. They were between 29 and 55 years old. Seven of the FIGSMs were married, and one was single. Of the seven FIGSMs who reported being married, three spouses lived in their home countries, and four spouses lived in the US with their FIGSM wives and children. All FIGSMs in this study came to the US to pursue their own graduate study; none had first come to the US as a spouse and then later transitioned their status to graduate student. FIGSMs' disciplines were diverse and included computers, journalism, communication, nursing, public health, anthropology, educational leadership, and law. Of the eight participants, three were in their first year, two were in their sixth year, one was in her second year, and one had completed one and a half years.

Qualitative Data Analysis

I conducted eight semi-structured interviews, with each interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. I transformed interview audio files into transcripts using OtterAI. Altogether, interview transcripts from my first round of semi-structured interviews added up to 152 single-

spaced pages. Transcripts from the member-checking phase (e.g., a focus group with four members or two individual interviews) numbered 61 pages. I uploaded all transcripts to Dedoose, a mixed-methods software program and conducted four coding cycles to discern patterns within and across participants' data.

Citation of Transcript Excerpts

I created a transcript citation system to ensure anonymity for my participants in my write-up. When I refer to an excerpt from an interview transcript, the citation uses the following abbreviations: FG=Focus group, MC=Member Check, and S=Speaker. Since I interviewed eight participants, I have labeled them from S1 to S8.

First Cycle Coding

I used open coding as my first coding approach (Saldaña, 2015). To open code, I read all transcripts line by line and assigned codes to reflect summaries of meaning that emerged in my interviewee transcripts. In Dedoose, parent codes are the major overarching codes and child codes are the subcodes within the overarching parent code. As part of my open coding, I also created memos to reflect ideas that emerged for me in the process of coding; my memos focused on relationships among my codes and emerging theory (Saldaña, 2015). After open coding all eight interview transcripts, I identified 20 parent codes and 16 child codes or sub-codes.

First Coding Approach: Code Consolidation

Referring to the analysis/code charts/code co-occurrence feature in Dedoose that identifies the most common overlap between codes, I created a correlation matrix reflecting relationships among my codes. I then used the co-occurrence matrix and my memos to guide the consolidation of my coding framework and the second iteration of my coding. I grouped my memos by common topic. The most common topics, in order of frequency, were:

recommendations ($n = 13$), why should universities care ($n = 4$), graduation time timeline ($n = 3$), and education of children back home ($n = 3$).

In this first stage of code consolidation, my choice of codes was informed by both inductive and deductive approaches. My deductive approach involved creating codes drawn from my research questions that were rooted in my literature synthesis and reflected overarching domains that are important in the lives of FIGSMs. They include the a priori codes of immigration, academic, social, financial, and family. Using these codes, I sought to ascertain whether these domains, which were identified as important for FIGSMs in the literature, were important for my participants. Simultaneously, I used an inductive approach (bottom-up approach through open coding) by creating codes reflecting ideas articulated by the interviewees that fell outside the a priori codes. In this way, I incorporated an exploratory method to reflect meanings that were important to FIGSMs themselves. For instance, I resisted collapsing gender and family as a single code because the emerging meaning from the transcripts was that women resisted the definition of what it meant to be a woman solely or primarily in relation to being a mother or a wife. I collapsed my original 20 parent codes into 8 parent codes (including great quotes) before beginning my second cycle of coding as seen in Figure 2 (see pp 22).

Second Cycle Coding

One of the risks of IPA is the possibility of over-identifying with the FIGSMs in my study (Tuffour, 2017). Thus, in the second round of my coding, I intentionally tried to better discern areas of differences between their experiences and mine by using a verbatim coding approach. In this way, I took more of observer role and tried to make the familiar strange (Myers, 2011). I used a magnitude coding approach where I coded the positives and negatives of each of the seven main parent codes and the positive and negative child codes under each of the seven

codes. After this round of coding, I was able to determine barriers to and facilitators of success for FIGSMs. In particular, a theme emerged related to acculturation, FIGSMs' sense of identity ("who we are") and confidence or self-esteem. This theme reflected FIGSMs' awareness of their change in social status from being high status in their home countries to being perceived as low social status in the U.S. because of U.S. racial and socioeconomic hierarchies. In this new low social status, many FIGSMs described feeling treated like they were second-class citizens, reflecting their student-related poverty and exposure to minority stress (Frost & Meyer, 2023). In their home countries, they were in the racial majority, and for many of them, the experience of racial discrimination was novel and highly stressful. In summary, the second cycle emerging theme was that FIGSMs often described acculturation in relation to their experiences of being treated as racial minorities and living with much lower socioeconomic status as graduate students than they had experienced in their home countries.

Third Cycle Coding

For my third cycle, I integrated codes derived from the second cycle of coding into my coding scheme that mapped onto my research questions as seen in Figure 2 (see next page). The codes that emerged from my third cycle were a combination of the second cycle codes combined with the patterns that emerged from my third cycle coding.

For instance, I further expanded gender as a code to include quotes related to gender-motherhood conflicts FIGSMs faced and to highlight the self-determination and autonomy of FIGSMs as intellectuals in-training and being a mother where children's needs often come.

This third round of coding brought out the following final themes: *poor mental health; immigration constrains life possibilities for FIGSMs and families; gender and cultural norms; acculturation; opportunity doesn't mean accessibility; and universities could do more to lessen*

our burden. Finally, after completing my third round of coding, I added descriptors to Dedoose that described key sociodemographic characteristics of participants drawn from the survey each participant completed. Examples of descriptors include FIGSM age, number of years in their graduate program, the number of children they have, children’s ages, and other important characteristics (see Appendix 1, Sociodemographic survey).

In summary, in my coding, I used an inductive approach to get a sense of patterns that emerged from the interviews. I did two cycles of inductive coding (open coding and InVivo or verbatim coding). To ensure I answered my research questions, I did a third cycle of coding, using a deductive coding scheme informed by my research questions and literature synthesis. Ultimately, my final coding scheme reflects my attempts to be thorough while being parsimonious. By my final coding cycle, the 20 parent codes I created through my first cycle of descriptive coding had increased to 43 parent codes in Dedoose.

Figure 2. Table representing coding cycles 1, 2, and 3.

Cycle 1: Open coding (Sakfaifa, 2015)	Cycle 2: Consolidation & Verbatim c	Theme	Cycle 2: magnitude coding	Themes	Coding cycle 3: Research questions	Reinforced previous themes
Academic	Academic	Acculturation, FIGSMs' sense o	Academic	Gender: "I am a full human being."	FCHLD barriers: academic	Poor mental Health
Accessibility CC	Economic		Negative	Immigration Constrains Life Possibilities for FIC	FCHLD barriers: economic	Gender
English as second language CC	Family		Positive	Opportunity Doesn't Equal Accessibility (ODE)	FCHLD barriers: immigration	Immigration Constrains Life Possibilities for FIGSMs and their Families
Acculturation	Gender		Facility relationships	Acculturation	FCHLD barriers: social/culture (psy)	Opportunity Doesn't Equal Accessibility (ODEA)
Culture CC	Great quotes		Negative	Universities Could Do More to Lessen Burdens	FCHLD family	Universities Could Do More to Lessen Burdens
Bilingual	Immigration		Positive	Poor mental health	FCHLD opportunity: academic	Acculturation
Economic	Psychosocial determinants of health		Graduation timeline		FCHLD opportunity: economic	
Personal finances CC	University support		Negative		FCHLD opportunity: immigration	
Employment			Positive		FCHLD opportunity: social/culture	
Facility relationships			Economic		FCHLD support: Academic	
Family			Negative		FCHLD support: economic	
children CC			Positive		FCHLD support: immigration	
K-12 support CC			Employment		FCHLD support: social/culture	
Orientation to pathways for children CC			Negative		FCHLD: other	
Spouse CC			Positive		FIGSM barriers: academic	
Funding available			Future possibilities		FIGSM barriers: economic	
Future possibilities			Negative		FIGSM barriers: immigration	
GE work load			Positive		USCIS control	
Gender			Family		FIGSM barriers: social/culture (psychosocial stress; poor mental health)	
Power CC			Negative		FIGSM family	
Graduation timeline			Positive		FIGSM opportunity: academic	
Great quotes			K-12 support		FIGSM opportunity: economic	
Immigration			Negative		FIGSM opportunity: immigration	
International from nonwestern country			Positive		FIGSM opportunity: social/culture	
International office			Spouse		FIGSM support: academic	
Mental health & psych			Negative		FIGSM support: economic	
Other factors affecting FIGSMs			Positive		FIGSM support: immigration	
Race			Gender		FIGSM support: social/culture	
Social			Negative		FIGSM: other	
Isolation CC			Positive		GENDER	
University's childcare CC			Immigration		UNIV barriers: academic	
Support CC			Negative		UNIV barriers: economic	
Advisor relationship CC of support			Positive		UNIV barriers: immigration	
Family GE Or family office CC of support			Psychosocial determinants of Health (SDoH)		UNIV barriers: social/culture (psychosocial stress; poor mental health)	
Local Community support CC of support			Negative		UNIV family	
Peer support CC of support			Positive		UNIV opportunity: academic	
			Acculturation		UNIV opportunity: economic	
			Bilingual		UNIV opportunity: immigration	
CC represents Child Code or subcodes			Negative		UNIV opportunity: social/culture	
			Positive		UNIV support: academic	
			International from nonwestern country		UNIV support: economic	
			Factors affecting FIGSMs' Mental health & psych		UNIV support: immigration	

Analyzing Data with Dedoose

I used visualization tools available in Dedoose to further investigate patterns in my qualitative data. These included the creation of a packed word cloud, bar charts reflecting the prevalence of codes by specific descriptors, code presence, and code co-occurrence.

Packed Code Cloud

The word cloud represents the relative commonality of each code by the size of the code; the larger the font, the greater the number of transcript excerpts that contain the code.

Charts

I also used both qualitative and mixed-method charts, including Code X Descriptor and Descriptor X Code and Descriptor ratio charts.

Codes X Descriptor. I compared the demographics to the variables known as fields in Dedoose. The fields represent descriptors, such as FIGSMs' age, marital status, location of spouse if any, number of children FIGSMs have and their ages, whether FIGSMs have been to the United States prior to enrolling in their graduate programs, number of years in graduate program, and duration of graduate program.

Descriptor X Code. This tool compares codes for each participant ID in detail. For instance, when I select all codes representing barriers within the four domains (academic, immigration, sociocultural and economic), it shows the extent to which barriers in each domain affect FIGSMs based on descriptors.

Descriptors in Analysis

For data analysis, I concentrated on the descriptors that had more significant information relative to the themes that emerged through my coding, such as the location of spouses if FIGSMs were married. Disaggregating my data by descriptors became particularly important

when considering patterns in relation to RQ3 in which I investigate what universities can better do to respond to the needs of FIGSMs and their children. The descriptors that became most important in relation to RQ3 included the ages of FIGSM children, FIGSMs' marital status, location of spouses, and number of years in their graduate programs.

It became apparent that the different levels of support FIGSMs have and need from their universities depend on whether spouses lived with them or stayed in their home country. This is why I added the descriptors marital status and whether spouses lived in the US or in their home countries. I also wanted to know the ages of FIGSMs' kids and what universities can do to support children and their specific (developmental) needs. By doing this, I could compare the needs of FIGSMs' children aged 0-10 to those in the 14-18 year-old range and 11-13 year-old children with 14-18 year-olds. This was the most challenging variable because two of the FIGSMs had children in two different age ranges. Therefore, the most feasible way to analyze the data to compare two age groups at a time.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS: “I CANNOT POUR FROM AN EMPTY CUP.”

In this chapter, I present the findings of my qualitative research. I describe how I analyzed data using Dedoose, show the various visualization tools I used to represent my data analysis, and explain how I used these results plus FIGSMs’ quotes to answer my three research questions:

RQ1. What are the supports, opportunities, and barriers for international female graduate students with children at U.S. institutions of higher education in relation to the following domains: social and cultural roles, economic, immigration and academic?

RQ2. What are the impacts of the social, immigration, economic, and academic supports, opportunities, and barriers for international female graduate students’ children?

RQ3. What are the implications for policy, practice, and services in U.S. institutions of higher education of the social, immigration, economic, and academic supports, opportunities, and barriers experienced by international female graduate students with children and their children?

Finally, I report the results of the data as it pertains to the themes that emerged from my second and third coding cycles.

Analyzing Data: Dedoose

I used visualization tools available in Dedoose to investigate patterns in my qualitative data. These included bar charts reflecting the prevalence of codes by specific descriptors, code presence, code co-occurrence, and finally a packed word cloud reflecting the most prevalent codes in my final coding schema.

Participant Characteristics

Participants in this study were FIGSMs enrolled in various academic programs across universities in the United States. The sample included a diverse group of individuals with varied marital statuses, number of children, locations of spouses, years in their graduate programs, ages of their children, duration of their graduate degrees and number of years they have been in their programs. Of the 8 FIGSMs, 2 were from Ghana, 1 was from China, 1 was from Ethiopia, 2 were from Nigeria, 1 was from Kenya, and 1 was from Gabon.

Speaker 1 was a married FIGSM with one child, age 17. Her spouse resides in their home country while she pursues her third year in a DEd program in Education at University of Oregon. Her child is not a U.S citizen.

Speaker 2, also married, had one child age 6. Her spouse resides in their home country while she pursues her first year in a PhD program in Communications at University of Oregon. Her child is not a U.S. citizen. Program duration is 4 years.

Speaker 3 was married, had two children ages 1 and 3. Her spouse has been with her since the start of her PhD program. She was in her sixth year in her PhD Public Health program at Oregon State University. Both children are U.S. citizens, and her program duration is 5 years.

Speaker 4, also married, had one child age 1. Her spouse resides in the U.S. while she pursues her fifth year in a PhD program in Anthropology at University of Oregon. Her spouse joined her after the birth of her child in her fourth year. Her child is a U.S. citizen

Speaker 5, married, had two children ages 3 and 5. Her spouse resides in their home country while she pursues one and half years in a Master's in Law program at University of Oregon. Both children are not U.S. citizens. The program duration is 9 months.

Speaker 6, also married, had four children ages 6, 8, 14 and 15. Her spouse resides in the U.S. while she pursues her first year in a PhD program in Nursing at University of Wisconsin.

Her family joined her after her first semester. Two of her children are U.S citizens, two are not. Program duration is 4 years.

Speaker 7, also married, had two children ages 15 and 16. Her spouse resides in the U.S. while she pursues her seventh year in a PhD program in Communications at University of Oregon. Her family joined her after her first 9 months in the U.S. Both children are not U.S. citizens. Program duration is 4 years.

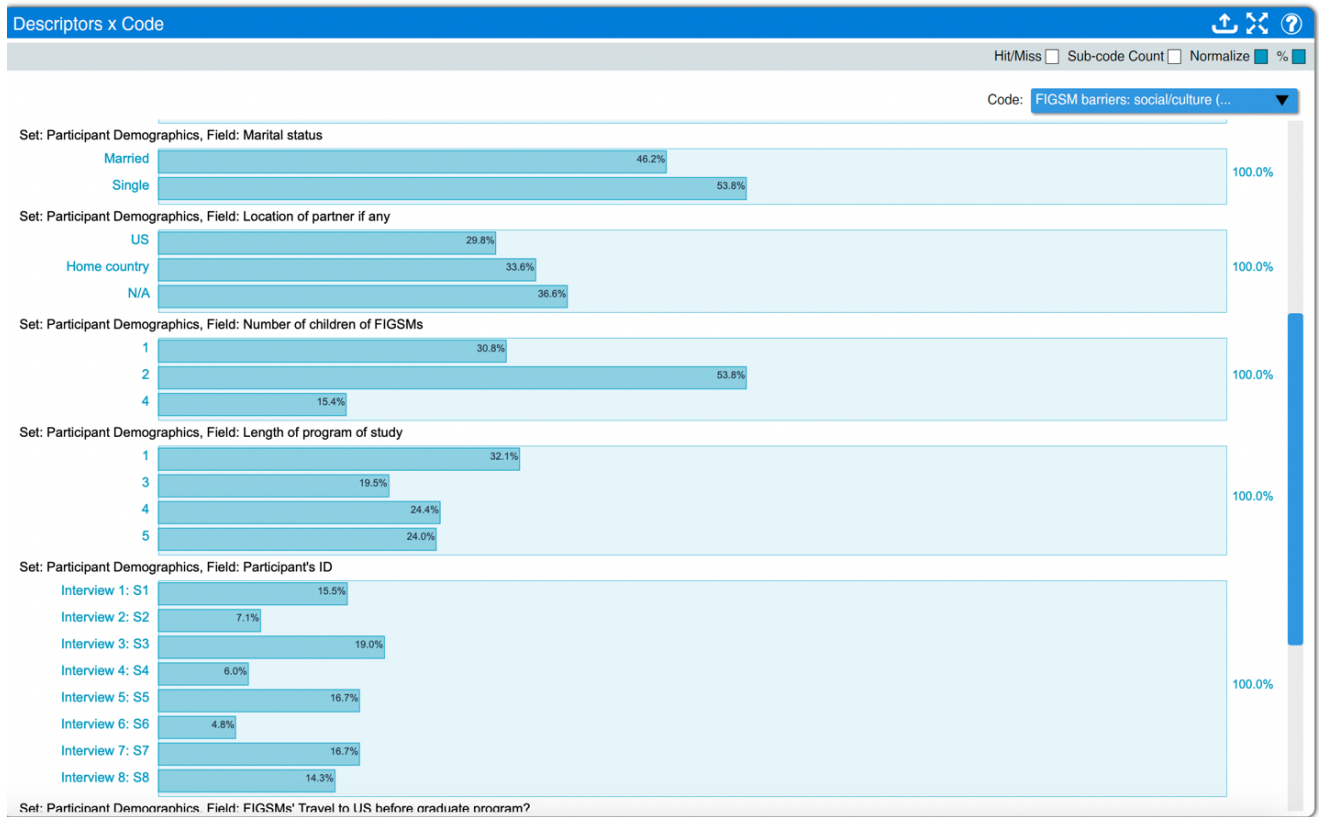
Speaker 8, a single mother, had two children, ages 11 and 13, and was in her first year of a PhD program in Nursing at University of Wisconsin. Her children joined her after her first semester in the program. Both children are not U.S. citizens. Program duration is 4 years.

These characteristics represented a broad spectrum of family configurations and academic stages among FIGSMs, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their experiences in managing academic and parental responsibilities.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants showing the Diverse Backgrounds and Specific Needs of FIGSMs.

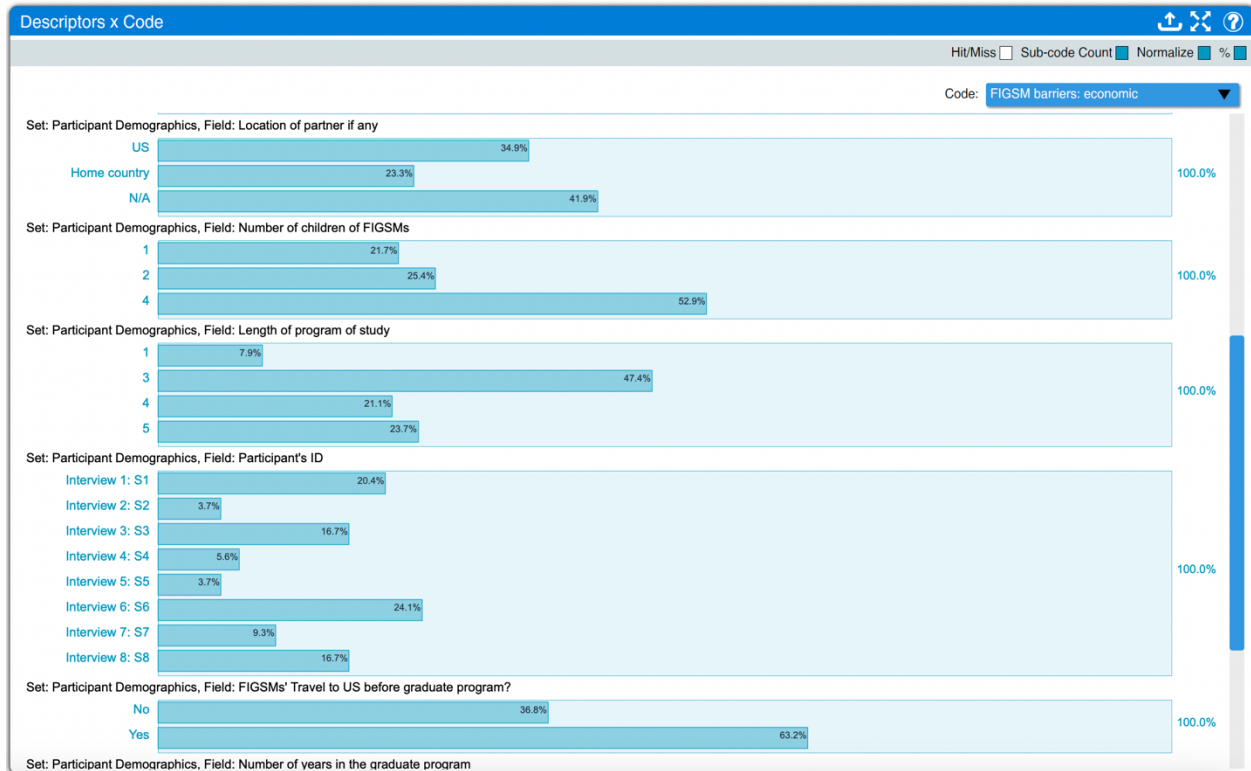
Participant ID	Marital Status	Number of Children	Ages of Children	Location of Spouse	Year in Graduate Program	Duration of Graduate Degree
S1	Married	1	17	In home country	3rd year	3 years
S2	Married	1	6	In home country	1st year	4 years
S3	Married	2	1, 3	In the U.S.	6th year	5 years
S4	Married	1	1	In the U.S.	5th year	4 years
S5	Married	2	3, 5	In home country	1.5 year	9 months
S6	Married	4	6, 8, 14, 15	In the U.S.	1st year	4 years
S7	Married	2	15, 16	In the U.S.	7th year	4 years
S8	Single	2	11, 13	In home country	1st year	4 years

Figure 3. Codes (FIGSMs barrier: sociocultural) by Descriptors



Data identifying the barriers, supports, and opportunities experienced by FIGSMs (RQ 1) and their children (RQ 2) in immigration, sociocultural, academic, and economic domains derived from one-on-one semi-structured interviews, the member check focus group, and individual member check meetings. The importance of the barriers FIGSMs experienced in these four domains was further confirmed by my analysis of code presence, a visualization tool that provides bar charts reflecting the prevalence of excerpts in each code disaggregated by descriptors (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 4. Codes (FIGSM barriers: economic) by Descriptors



In Figure 5 below, we can see that the most present codes are *FIGSM barrier: Academic*, *FIGSM barrier: Economic*, *FIGSM barrier: Immigration*, *FIGSM barrier: Social/culture*, *FIGSM family*, and *University opportunity: Social/cultural*. It is important to note that although Speaker 3 did not have a code presence for *FIGSM barrier: immigration*, she discussed immigration and its effects on her family during the member check. This solidifies the need for member checks and focus groups in qualitative research. This observation substantiates the that that immigration barriers as experienced by FIGSMs from some qualitative codes was evidence was important, but it was mostly non-existent for FIGSMs' children; only one participant mentioned immigration barriers with regards to her child.

Barriers in the Lives of FIGSMs

Immigration

FIGSMs reported facing unique challenges related to immigration policies and financial constraints related to their immigration status. Navigating the complex U.S. immigration system was described as a stressor by every FIGSM. Concerns about visa status, work authorization, and the potential impact on their family's stability also distracted from FIGSMs' academic and personal foci.

FIGSMs often face stringent visa requirements. Student visas (such as the F-1 visa in the U.S.) typically do not allow FIGSMs to work beyond 20 hours a week, limiting their ability to support their families financially. Many countries provide dependent visas (similar to the F-2 visa in the United States) for spouses and children. However, these visas often come with restrictions, such as prohibitions on spouses working, which can further strain FIGSMs financially. (Interview 5 S5)

International students pay higher tuition fees than domestic students. Coupled with the cost of living and raising a child, this can lead to significant financial burdens. Access to scholarships, grants, and financial aid is often limited for international students. They may also be ineligible for the government assistance programs available to domestic students. (Interview 3 S3)

Inability of Universities to Offer Relief from Federal Immigration Requirements

FIGSMs' identified uncertainties regarding visa status and the potential impact on their ability to stay in the country as reasons for seeking support from their universities. This support

became that much more critical when additional family members were involved. Speaker 3 described her experience.

I feel like, you know, universities are trying, you know, I'm not gonna be like, they're not doing anything that will be very ungrateful, I'm saying they're supportive. Like, even though of course, a lot of these don't apply necessarily, to U.S. International females, that I, you know, I learned recently that now in Oregon, you have like a three-month paid leave if you give birth or something. And that's mostly for like U.S. citizens. And you know, resident, which is great, because it's helping mothers, you know, student and it's good. But I don't qualify for that, you know, I remember, even when I got pregnant with my first, I was only allowed three weeks of paid leave. And even then, I remember like the GTA Association, they offered to give me some of their hours so that I could bump up to at least six or seven weeks, which was great. But then again, I have to go through the whole immigration because you have the Office of International Student that's reminding you that you want to make sure that you are full-time enrolled in school so that it doesn't impact your status. Right. So, it's really that conflict between the university is trying, but at the same time, the immigration system works differently. So, as much as you want to use some of the leverages that are provided by the University, but at the same time, you always have to make sure that they are aligned well with your immigration status. Otherwise, you're in trouble...And I remember I was told, you know, if you give birth, then you have to take a leave of absence. [B]eing an immigrant is stressful in itself. You know, you don't know how that might impact you. Even though you know, they say, No, it's not going to impact you. But you know, if sometimes you're not sure, you just want to be on the safe side of things. And just keep going to school, do what you have to do. But the reality is that was you, you will be slowed down because you just give birth to a baby. (MC2, S3 50:36)

For this FIGSM, juggling immigration requirements while taking time she needed to bond with and care for her newborn were in conflict. Though the university attempted to provide support, with the graduate student union providing perhaps the most concrete support, this student still had to satisfy federal requirements. As a result, the university's attempts to support her could not rise to the level of meeting her needs.

Family: Immigration

Participants provided conflicting narratives. From the first three cycles of coding, I understood that immigration barriers are not immigration related per se because United States Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) gives visas to families relatively easily when

graduate education is the reason for the visa. FIGSMs stated that none of their spouses or children were denied the visas, and universities seemed to give FIGSMs the required materials needed for family immigration. However, during the focus group member check, I got push back from three of the women who clarified their experiences with immigration. It is possible that FIGSMs' experiences with visas were influenced by the particular relationship the United States has with a country. Regardless, the women maintained that they suffered emotional stress associated with immigration process. Speaker 5 shared that she was denied the first time she applied for a U.S. student visa and the process is not something we can "gloss over" (MC1 S3 17:38). Speaker 2 added that "it's a miracle" to have a visa approved and that

the whole point of the process [including the fact that] you have paid this [huge] amount of money that nobody's going to give you back if you don't get [the visa]. And then there's also . . . a lot of emotional stress that goes around the whole visa situation. But even when you get it, you are still in disbelief, you know, like you want to get out of that place. . . . [I]f I go to the airport and leave, should they say, Okay, there's a problem come back, you know, it's . . . the whole process in itself [that] is just traumatic. [T]here is no one pattern that somebody can say . . . is [a] guarantee[d to way to secure a visa] . . . [because] you could all be going to the same [embassy], but one person's document is going to be different from yours. But [then,] there's just one more thing that this other person is going to say that is going to make them either be given the visa or not be given. [That is what causes] the whole emotional stress. (FG1 S2 19:24)

However, during member check 2, Speaker 3 reiterated my initial understanding of immigration barriers when she stated that

obtaining a visa is . . . not an issue most time you . . . if you have clean records and everything, it's not a big deal. Like. It's . . . once you get here, and you realize that your opportunities are very limited. And that creates an additional stress, you know, financial stress. Because for us, as international student, we are mostly limited to working on campus. And then on campus, the good thing is, most grad schools have most I wouldn't say all most grad schools have support. But again, how much is it, you're working like part time, you're barely making over \$1,000. And you are expected to live on that and support your family with that. And then when your spouse comes, they can't work. That also creates, in some cases, tensions, because you might have someone who was working back home, and then is here trying to support you, but then finding themselves in a position where they can't do much. Even for females, you know, it's frustrating to be home, just imagine for a man. . . . [A]s an international student, you can't qualify, you

don't qualify for many things. Although when you're working, you've paid taxes but you're not eligible for anything, SNAP anything, anything, you don't get it. So, you apply pretty much limited to what you get. And you know, it's stressful, because a lot of a lot of positions don't have some support. Most of the GTA contract or GTF contracts are like nine month like faculty jobs, right. But then, at least as a faculty, you can decide to have your salary spread over 12 months, but then for us, you don't have that option. You weren't you know, you teach for nine months, and that's it. Your partner can't work. And then during the summer, it's up to you to find how you're going to survive for three months with kids. And that's very stressful. (MC 2, S3, 25:48)

Additionally, while some FIGSMs had immigration challenges for their children, others did not. The dissonance in FIGSMs' reported experiences with immigration led to my realization that the variability in FIGSMs' experiences related to differences in the ages of their children.

Immigration Impacts

Separation Anxiety and Reunification Challenges. Due to visa restrictions or financial constraints, some students had to leave family members in their home country temporarily, leading to separation anxiety and emotional stress. The process of bringing family members to the United States can be complex and expensive, often involving long waiting periods and significant paperwork. (Interview 8 S8)

Financial Strain Due to Immigration Costs. The costs associated with visa applications, legal assistance, and potential visa renewals are substantial. These expenses add to the already significant financial burden of tuition and living costs. Some spouses' decision to stay in their home countries to better provide financial support for FIGSMs and their children was related, in part, to immigration-related limits on their abilities to make a living in the United States.

Sociocultural Barriers in the Lives of FIGSMs

The social and emotional challenges of adjusting to a new culture and being away from family and friends were particularly acute for FIGSMs. Isolation and loneliness were commonly reported, and the stress of balancing academic and parental responsibilities impacted their mental health and academic performance (Interview 5 S5).

FIGSMs described often facing high levels of emotional stress due to the demands of their multiple roles as mother, spouse, graduate student, and graduate student employee. FIGSMs were not able to attend social events because of lack of available and affordable childcare; often, organizers and cohort members stopped inviting them to events because they anticipated the women would not be able to attend (FG1 S2). What emerged most strongly in the data and coding for “sociocultural” was that the pressure of juggling multiple roles with little social support, and in an unfamiliar culture and country, was highly correlated with significant mental health issues, including stress, anxiety, and depression.

Social support: Community, Family Support and Chosen Families. Many FIGSMs reported physical distance from family networks as one of the greatest challenges to their abilities to do their academic work. When intense academic deadlines were further challenged by losses of family members, the capacity for FIGSMs to meet academic expectations faltered even more. As one FIGSM commented,

I love my kids, but if it was just me, I probably would have been done by now. You know what I mean? But because within three years, I had two kids that impacted me, that impacted my progress. And I felt like because I don't have the social support that I would have had back home, I have to just call it all by myself with my husband. But then again, we have gender roles that play a big part. So as much as I want to finish, I'm eager to finish, I'm exhausted. But there's also that reality that I just can't do as I want, you know. I will just take a very stupid example. I'm on very tight deadlines right now, like, I should be working 10-12 hours a day literally, to be able to defend. But two weeks ago, my husband lost his mom, that's a big hit for him, I can't say I'm going to work 10 hours a day, my husband is going to take care of the kids now he is mourning his mom. That

impacts him, that impacts me. Because as a wife, I need to support him. My career is important. But I have to support him. And supporting him means spending more time with the kids, finding a way to balance so that he can reflect because the demand on him is also high from back home, there are expectations. If I did not have a husband, if it was just me, girl, I will be working like crazy. That's one thing. And second, as much as I want to stay on the library till midnight, because I want to keep working, guess what? I need to come home. Because I need to make sure that the kids are fed, my husband can do a lot, but there are certain things he won't do. So, I need to be home, make sure that kids are, you know, fed, in bed. By the time that's done, I'm exhausted, I need to sleep. So as much as I understand a part of Yes, I'm a full human being. But I feel like my progress, my efficiency has a lot to do with my family. Because when my mom was here, or my mother-in-law was here, mostly my mom, I had the support of having somebody taking care of my kids. And I could go to school from 8 am to 8 pm, not worrying about what they're going to eat, if they're fine, because I knew they were fine. So, I could focus and progress very quickly and be that person [who] was done and out. But when they're not around, I don't have to do it. So, I understand, you know, their point of view. But in my case, really, you know, I won't speak for other for other people. But I will say for me, my efficiency, especially since I've had kids as really depended on my specific situation, my unique situation. (MC2, S3, 7:20)

Further, cultural differences contributed to FIGSMs' difficulty in finding and creating social support in the United States, which made them that much more reliant on ties with family back home. As one FIGSM described, she and others had to quickly acculturate in a "culture that is very individualistic" compared to the "community-centered cultures" FIGSMs are used to (FG1 S2 1:23:01). As Speaker 5 reflected,

It is like they don't understand what we're going through. And I guess that we have nontraditional students from the U.S., but a lot of us are miles away from home. We don't have supports. We don't have family. We don't have some of us even legit have networking issues, like from a culture how we network is totally different from how people networking. Yeah. So, you're in other countries. So, we're literally alone. (FGI; S5: 38:01)

This excerpt reflects the isolation FIGSMs faced as international students who are mothers. In response, one FIGSM commented on her reliance on chosen kin, on compatriots in the United States she can turn to for support. As Speaker 2 described,

When an event comes up, I, I find somebody who can, you know, for the Ghanaian community here for me, it's like, those are like my in-laws. And the Kenyan community here is like my family. So, and I would like to appreciate them because they constantly

come through for me in ways that I will not be able to talk them because it takes a lot, you know, and then now, it just after me, I've trained my kid in such a way that if somebody is coming over to take care of you, these are the rules, these are the guidelines, this is how we behave, and all of that, so that it makes it also easier for the person that is taking care of the kid. (FG1 S2 30:52)

Regarding support for students, FIGSMs had different ideas about when something was a support versus an entitlement that they did not particularly want. One example was provided by Speaker 1 who said, “Having an airport shuttle [would be helpful because she has] noticed [flights are cheaper when students fly into bigger airports], rather than in [smaller airports], like almost by \$1000.” However, Speaker 3 said,

I was also born and raised in a culture [where] you can't access . . . everything you want. You . . . will have to find a way to make it work. And I feel like even back home, just the fact of me waking up super early to catch the bus and go to school. And so, I grew up with that mentality that things are not gonna be handed over to me. . . . I did not grow up with like a driver or somebody. So, I'm not necessarily expecting to get to a new place and have people pick me up. For me, [even] if they pick me up from the airport, [I consider that] a luxury that I will really . . . appreciate but I'm not expecting that. I'm not expecting people to be at my service pretty much. . . . Of course, I will want more support, but there are some areas where it's not a priority for me. [I]f I don't have anybody, I'll figure something out. (MC 2 S3 58:33).

However, she agreed that if FIGSMs “are just getting to a new place . . . [it is great to have] somebody you can talk to [and] somebody you can rely on is great” (MC2 S3 1:00:24).

Acculturation Stress

FIGSMs described their surprise and dismay when they realized that life in the United States is not like it was depicted in popular culture. As Speaker 8 described,

When you are back home and you see America on television, you get a lot of visions and dreams. But when you get here, you realize that it wasn't exactly the movie watched. You may be very surprised. Thankfully, I didn't watch so much American movies. But it was a surprise and all I had so my surprise that I couldn't keep my shock. I had to tell some of the lectures that movies were disappointed because everything I hoped for was not exactly what it was (Interview 8 S8)

The majority of FIGSMs enjoyed a relatively higher social status in their country of origin, so coming to the United States where they were a graduate student and also perceived as a racial minority was described as shocking. Though FIGSMs may have realized immediately that their built environment in the United States was not what they had seen in movies, it often took longer to experience the effects of other aspects of adjusting to life in the new country as a struggling international graduate student.

My analysis of descriptors in relation to codes revealed that FIGSMs who had come to the United States within the past year and still had strong ties to social networks in their home countries may have been buffered from stress resulting from comparisons to their life in the United States with back home, especially if they lived within ethnic enclaves. The longer FIGSMs lived in the United States, the more their stress increased, possibly due to their experiences of acculturation stress that were related in part to being perceived (and socialized) into a U.S.-based minority social status.

Further analysis of descriptors x codes involved examining the relationship between a descriptor reflecting whether or not a FIGSM had travelled to the United States before beginning graduate study and the code of *barriers: sociocultural*. I observed that the students who answered yes, they had traveled to the United States prior to beginning graduate school actually had a higher number of social barrier excerpts compared to those who had never been to the United States.

The protective factors might be lower when FIGSMs compared their experiences to back home. The longer they are in the United States, the harder it is to compare their experiences to back home. The stress buffers of home-based social networks start eroding, and suddenly, the reference point starts to be the United States and not their homes country (their safe place); at

that point, they compare their experiences to those of others in the United States who do not have the same barriers and experiences related to minority stressors. How you are perceived as a minority in the United States can feel like suddenly being relegated to second-class citizenship, where one might be exposed to stressors that have nothing to do with you as a person but instead relate to histories and biases within the United States. This phenomenon accounted for lot of psychosocial stress of these FIGSMs as expressed by Speaker 7 when she says,

By being different, you are always under the radar of people looking at you, you know, you need to always perform, right? So, the easy way to deal with that is to integrate to change who you are so that you become like them. (Interview 7, S7...)

Another FIGSMs stated that,

Personally, as an African, I want to relate with more Africans. So, but the reality is that we are a minority compared to another immigrant. So, most of the time when I attend those events in Oregon, there are not many people who look like me. So even though we might have some of the same experiences, I feel like something is missing. (Interview 3, S3)

The longer immigrants live in the US, particularly if they are black or brown, the poorer their mental health and physical health (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Despite the very small sample size of my study, the emerging patterns mirrored those documented in the established literature.

Opportunity Does Not Equal Accessibility: Social Supports Differed by the Age of FIGSMs'

Children

With regard to childcare needs, social support, and immigration, there were differences in FIGSMs' barriers. Speaker 3 (FIGSM of children 0-10) described her childcare realities as a barrier to her ability to access social support and she stated that,

Asking a mom who's been out the whole day, you know, because when I go to campus . . . [I] have to leave my house at 6 am to go. And by the time it's five, it's been the whole day. I've not been home. I've not been with my kids, and asking me again to stay for another one, two hours. I just can't. I just can't because of the time, you know, because by the time you know, six, seven because when I get home, it's usually 6:30. That's just enough time for me to make dinner, to shower the kids, and get them to bed

around nine. If I were to come home at eight, those kids will be in bed by 11, you know, midnight. And as much as I would want to interact more with colleagues, I think I've just come to terms with the fact that I'm not going to have a social life, per se with my colleagues. I see them in the hallway, we briefly chat. Sometimes we'll have lunch, you know, for an hour or you know, 30 minute, but that's like once in a while, people usually want to meet after hours, but I don't have the luxury to meet after hours. (MC2 S3 33:44)

This FIGSM was acknowledging that though there were opportunities to socialize, she was not able to access them because of barriers she was unable to surmount.

Speaker 8 (FIGSM with children 11-13), on the other hand, said she did not go for social events for other reasons, not because of childcare challenges. However, she could see how childcare could be a barrier for some FIGSMs, but it was not in her case (MC1, S8, 9:58).

Through comparing these experiences, it became clear that a potential source of the dissonance was the developmental stages of FIGSM children.

Sociocultural Impacts

Cultural Barriers and Limited Social Interactions. Differences in language, cultural norms, and social customs can make it challenging to form connections with peers and faculty, exacerbating feelings of social isolation. The dual responsibilities of academic work and childcare often limited these students' abilities to participate in social activities, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. (Interview 5 S5)

Lack of childcare opportunities. Finding reliable and affordable childcare can be a significant challenge. Limited availability of on-campus childcare facilities and the high cost of private childcare services created substantial stress for FIGSMs. Trusting childcare providers and ensuring the quality of care in a foreign country was difficult, adding to the anxiety and burden of parenting. Many universities have limited on-campus childcare facilities, and those that do exist often have long waiting lists and high fees. (CITE)

Economic Barriers in the Lives of FIGSMs: “More money. . . . Please. . . . More”

Speaker 8 described her financial challenges from the moment she arrived in the United States,

Luckily for me, I had an uncle who met me in New York and then brought me here. And I was so insistent that he should stay [back in New York], and he was like, no, I'll bring you because I... haven't been to Wisconsin, I want to come and see the place. And he brought me when he brought me, and I realized how frustrated and stranded I would have become [b]ecause I had lots of money on me about \$5,000 [but] nobody will take my money for even a hotel. So, he was using his card all the time to buy food to do everything so imagine you don't have [no]one. It wouldn't have helped much. (MC1 S8 1:03:11)

The high costs of tuition, living expenses, and childcare in the United States contributed to significant financial strain on FIGSMs, financial pressures that one FIGSM reported were unknown to her U.S.-born friends,

One of them asked me last week, how much was my air tickets? And I said \$2800. And he was like my God! That's a lot. . . . I said why are you so surprised? \$2800 a lot of money for you?” Yes. Do you know how long it will take for me to get such a money? And I was like wow, then we are doing a lot yeah, we are doing a lot you know, doing so much for that 2800. If you convert it to my country's money today it's a lot of money . . . people have a lot of problems with their rents, their bills, their taxes that comes with all those things. So, it is just doesn't work. Yes. Because if I'm coming as a student and I must have about \$40,000 in my accounts and come and sit in your country and then you feed me and then my family. I have to take care of them because I needed that \$40,000 in my account. Citizens can't seem to have that money. How much more I have to pay, about 13 times your money for the \$40,000 so it's kind of a huge kind of investment. Yeah, it's all not a good mental state of life. And then they will say you have to go and seek mental health [care]. (MC1 S8 46:30)

As mentioned above, visa regulations and work permit limitations may restrict international students' employment options and earning potential, affecting their financial stability and well-being. High living expenses, particularly in major cities, can strain students' budgets and limit their ability to afford housing, childcare, healthcare, and other essential needs.

Reliance on loans or financial aid from their home country may result in accumulated debt for international students, increasing financial stress and long-term financial insecurity.

Although . . . as an international student, we cannot get the student loan from the government. But I can get [a] student loan from my country, so my husband is work[ing] in [my country and he] use[s] his salary to pay back the student loans. (Interview 1 S1...)

Many international students are not eligible for public assistance programs, which means they must bear the full cost of healthcare, childcare, and other essential services without external support (Interview 3 S3).

Academic Barriers in the Lives of FIGSMs

Academic Workload and Expectations. FIGSMs often struggled to balance the demanding workload of graduate studies with parenting responsibilities. Speaker 4 described her realization that she needed support in fulfilling her class requirements after she had a baby and sought the help of the student accessibility center,

As a parent, I think that would if that's made accessible to me as well, maybe, to get extensions, you know, when taking classes, it would reduce the pressure on me as a mom, me as a student....I have so much work to do I have this deadline to meet up, I also have to be a mom and things like that. So yeah, having some extensions provided by the accessibility for parents would also come in handy. Because I did apply this year, or last year, and I met with one of the accessibility coordinators, but he told me my condition, as a parent does not fall into that category. They're looking for people that are like, that have some sort of disability and I'm like, well, parenthood or being a mom is not a disability in itself. But I also need attention because sometimes I'm awake all night with a [baby] and I have deadlines and I can't meet the deadline. (Interview 4 S4)

Relationships with Faculty Advisors/Supervisors. FIGSMs' relationships with faculty members and advisors significantly impacted their academic experiences, potentially serving as both barriers and facilitators to their success. Balancing academic demands with childcare responsibilities and family obligations often strained international students' time management,

productivity, and ability to fully engage in academic pursuits. Faculty members and advisors sometimes lacked awareness of the unique challenges faced by international graduate student mothers, such as childcare responsibilities, immigration issues, or cultural adjustments.

Accessing mentorship and guidance from faculty members or advisors was sometimes challenging for FIGSMs, particularly if their advisors' cultural backgrounds, race/ethnicity, gender, and nativity (e.g., U.S.-born rather than international), were different from their own. These differences sometimes hindered FIGSMs' professional development, networking, and career advancement prospects.

Faculty members' insufficient understanding of challenges confronted by FIGSMs sometimes led to a lack of empathy, support, and accommodation for FIGSMs' needs, hindering academic progress and well-being, as shown by Speaker 3,

I feel like even my supervisor doesn't get it because he told me . . . "I understand it's hard for you. But I also have three kids. . . . I've learned to make it work." I'm like, yes, your wife works part time so that she can mostly take the kids. Sorry. I'm like, Have you realized that when we do attend conferences, you always come by yourself? . . . [Who] are you leaving your kids with? Your wife because you trust that she will take care of them? Have you noticed that since I've had kids, I'm coming to the conference with my kids? Why do you think that is? Why do you think that it is? Now, do you think I have the luxury of going somewhere after the conference? Because while I'm at the conference, I'm going to the hotel room to check on them once, twice, make sure they have food. And even after the conference while you guys go for after conference meetings and talks, I'm going to my room. So how can you sit there and tell me "I get it?" No, you don't know. You don't. (MC2 S3 19:23)

Language barriers or differences in communication styles may impede effective communication between FIGSMs and their faculty members or advisors, leading to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of expectations and requirements (Interview 1 S1).

Additionally, differences in academic and career aspirations, research interests, or cultural backgrounds between international graduate student mothers and their advisors resulted

in mismatches in expectations and goals, leading to conflicts or dissatisfaction with the mentoring relationship (Interview 3 S3; Interview 5 S5).

Rigidity in academic policies, deadlines, or expectations posed challenges for FIGSMs who required flexibility and accommodation due to caregiving responsibilities, health issues, or other personal circumstances. Also, the lack of flexibility in scheduling meetings, assignments, or exams exacerbated stress and created barriers to academic success for these women (FG1 S2; Interview 1 S1).

Insensitivity to cultural differences or biases in academic interactions contributed to feelings of marginalization, alienation, and imposter syndrome among FIGSMs. Speaker 7 described that in the first two years of her graduate program,

[she] was feeling . . . what they called the imposter syndrome [and she] felt that [she did not] belong here. Or maybe I'm not really good, or as good as . . . the other students in my cohort, things like that. And there is a feeling of being not heard . . . in class, you know, as a PhD students, you go to a class, which is a seminar, and as a student, you contribute to the discussions. And because what you are, what interests you is not the norm. I mean, who cares about what is going on in [my country], really. So, they don't want to hear you. So, you ended . . . up not talking? And, for me, [it was a] cultural shock. . . . I have this expectation that a university being a university, [that is supposed to be a] place of intellectual curiosity, where people would love to engage in a conversation to gain new perspective . . . but sometimes I feel that some of our professors, they will tell you, "Oh, but I don't know, I don't know much about Africa." [Even when] you approach them for, for example, oh, let's do this research. Can we collaborate on this? [They say they] don't know about Africa. [I tell them] That's my expertise. I know, Africa—just help me with the theories [because they are the] same whether it's in the U.S. or in Africa or elsewhere. [To me,] not knowing is part of why we are here to learn . . . [and] they might not hear me, but they are not going to silence me. So, if I am passionate about a topic or something, I would say it, I don't care whether they hear me or not, but at least it's not festering inside me. I'm not keeping it in. (Interview 7, S7)

Academic Impacts

Childcare availability and affordability are critically linked to FIGMS' academic performance. Without access to affordable childcare, FIGSMs find it difficult to attend evening classes and complete their coursework. University support services play a vital role in providing the necessary resources and support, however, their availability varies (Interview 2 S2). Below I consider some of the impacts of the academic barriers FIGSMs reported experiencing.

Delayed Graduation. Balancing academic responsibilities with caregiving duties led to extended time-to-degree completion for some. Female international students with children may take longer to graduate due to reduced course loads, interruptions in their studies, or the need to prioritize family obligations. As Speaker 3 described,

I'm in my sixth year, you know, and I've pretty much been told that, oh, you need to finish by this year. Because if you don't, next year you don't have any funding. And knowing my situation, that I'm not a U.S. citizen, I know I'm not eligible for loans. I know, I can't just say, oh, yeah, even if I don't have funding anymore, I can just work and pay out of pocket. Where do I work? I don't have the papers to work. So now it's about finding that time to finish even if it means, you know, killing myself and doing it just do it. (MC2, S3, 56:05)

Speaker 2 added her impressions,

Take into consideration the fact that we have challenges that are beyond...academia and for international students. Most people living in other countries have almost the same gender traditional roles that really play a big part into how productive and how efficient we can be. I'm not saying to give us room to graduate in 10 years when the average time is five years, or don't we? Yes, yes. When the average time is five years, but maybe try to be a bit more understanding and help us get resources that [might help us with] being efficient. (MC 2 S2 1:11:38).

The stress and time constraints associated with managing family and academic responsibilities can negatively impact academic performance. FIGSMs often struggle to meet deadlines, participate in extracurricular activities, and engage fully in research or coursework. In short, available and affordable childcare is so central to the lives of graduate students,

particularly those who are mothers of young children, that the variability in FIGSMs' academic success might be perceived more as a reflection of institutional support for graduate student families rather than as an indication of a FIGSMs' capacity to perform graduate level work.

Limited Research Opportunities. Due to time constraints and caregiving responsibilities, these students may have fewer opportunities to participate in research projects, attend conferences, or collaborate with faculty and peers, limiting their professional development and academic networking.

Career Development Delays. Limited participation in research, professional networking, and extracurricular activities can delay career advancement. Female international students with children might miss out on mentorship opportunities, internships, and other career-building experiences.

Reduced Job Market Competitiveness. FIGSMs' academic and personal challenges can affect their competitiveness in the job market. Gaps in their CVs, fewer publications, and limited professional experience can hinder their job prospects post-graduation.

In addition to the barriers FIGSMs identified in the academic, immigration, sociocultural, and economic domains, codes emerged related to additional barriers. The Dedoose word cloud below (see Figure 6) shows the most commonly mentioned codes by the number of excerpts they contain, with larger words reflecting a larger number of excerpts (higher frequency of occurrences). The most common code is "poor mental health," followed by "FIGSM family" and next "FIGSM barriers: economic," "FIGSM barriers: immigration" and "University support: Social & culture" and then "gender."



Figure 6. Word Cloud Showing Poor Mental Health as the Most Mentioned Code

FIGSM Families

Though FIGSMs continually brought up their families—children and sometimes spouses—throughout their discussion of all the domains, they had specific comments related to key tensions between their academic work, parenting, childcare, and accessing the support their children needed in K-12 schools.

FIGSMs reported that the time required for childcare and household responsibilities left little room for self-care or leisure, contributing to mental exhaustion. Inadequate access to affordable and reliable childcare services compounded their stress, as students struggled to find safe and suitable care options for their children while attending classes and completing research. As Speaker 3 commented,

Even for white Americans feel like gender roles are there as much as we promote equity. Still, a lot of my colleagues are going through the same, maybe not at the same extent, but trust me, they're going through the same... expectations. And I remember that lady, she graduated last year. So, she did it in five years. And truthfully, she told me the only reason she was able to do is because she lives in the same town with her family or in-laws, both. And she's from a church. So, she has her family, their in-laws are there, and she has the support of the church, you know, because I think her mom or dad are pastors. So, they have that. I remember she was telling me when she had the baby, she had a lady coming over and taking care of the baby while she was working in the room. So okay. She could be, maybe, I'm not saying she does. But she, I mean, if she lives in the same town with her parents, maybe on the week on the weekend, she might feel like Hey, Mom, Dad, could you take my kid for a couple of hours? Or could they spend the night you know, those are grandparents? I don't think they would mind, and you know, these are church people. So then when she has the kids, you know, when the grandparents have the kids over a weekend, she can rest, and she can work. (MC2, S3, 22:16)

FIGSMs also noted that the lack of K-12 support for their children created substantial challenges affecting the academic success and well-being of both FIGSMs and their children.

One FIGSM stated that her university

will make sure that you take them to school, they don't want the kids to be in their house, they will rather put pressure on you to do your things well. So, we as parents, we were pressured to take them to school, we're pressured to do a whole lot of things. And that that is it. But the school, itself, will not do anything for you; the parents have to find a school for the kids to go and then pick them up after school. And if you want to put them for after-school, you have to pay after the class is time three o'clock, you have to pay for extra class. And, whatever, cheerleading, you have to pay for that. If it's Girls Guide, you have to pay. So, it's like, if you want government assistance [to to pay] you need to go and fill out forms for them to waive all those strategies for you. So, I think the school hasn't done in terms of anything, you have to go look for school for them and make sure they are okay, they are doing extra classes, and all that. (Interview 6 S6)

It was telling that an analysis of the co-occurrence of codes (visualization tool) revealed that the greatest correlations were between the codes of *family* and *psychosocial barriers* (Figure 7). This finding visualizes in a unique way the word cloud in Figure 6. It is clear that one cannot think about FIGSMs without thinking about families. And one cannot understand FIGSMs' focus on creating high quality lives for their families without thinking about the barriers they confront

in immigration, sociocultural, financial and academic spheres, all with implications for FIGSMs' health and well-being.

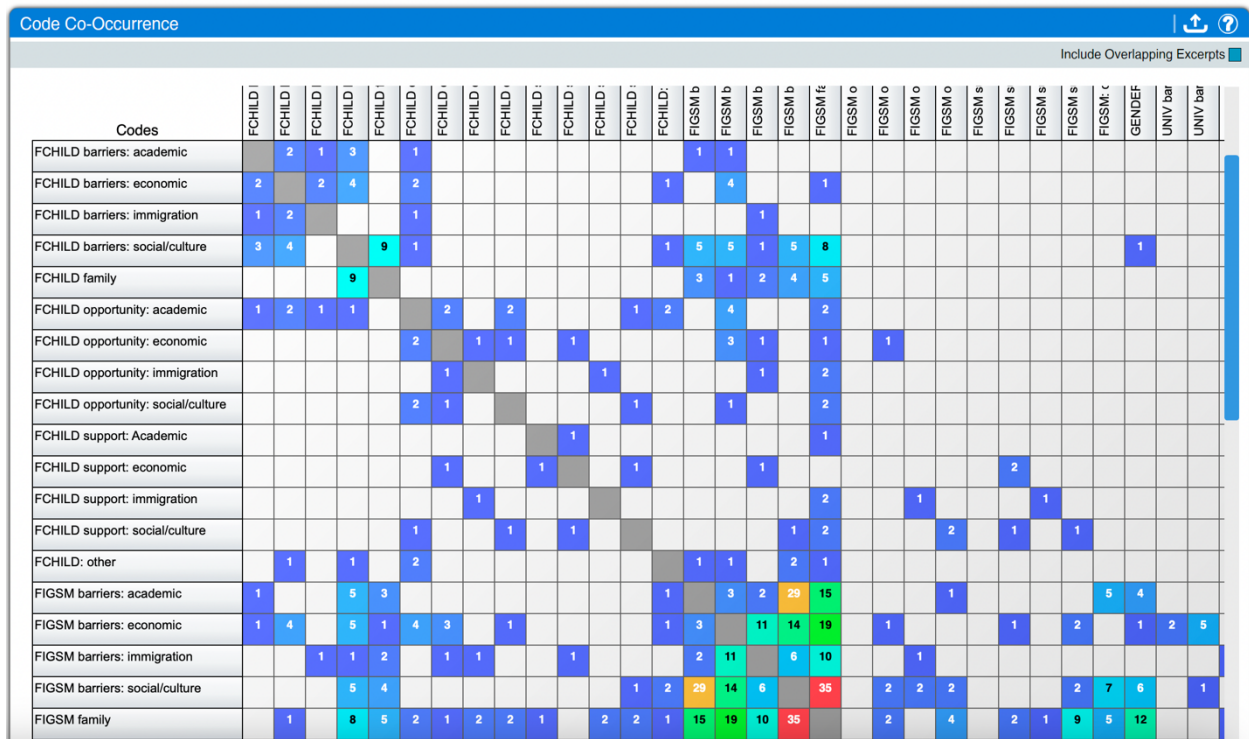


Figure 7. Code co-occurrence showing correlation between family and psychosocial health

Notably, FIGSMs' experiences as mothers raised important questions about the centrality of their role as mothers to their identities as women.

GENDER: “I’m A Full Human Being”

Gender may appear to be a simple theme, but it is actually complex. For some women, gender related to their experiences in relation to their families. Speaker 1 said, “Once you have a family, it's no longer about just you and your opportunities. It's about the well-being of the family. And as a parent, you want the well-being of your kids more than anything” (Interview 3, S3...).

In a different example, Speaker 2 described the importance of her role as a spouse when she said,

I'm on very tight deadlines right now, like, I should be working [long] hours a day literally, to be able to defend. But two weeks ago, my husband lost his mom, that's a big hit for him, I can't say I'm going to work 10 hours a day, my husband is going to take care of the kids as he is mourning his mom. That impacts him, that impacts me. Because as a wife, I need to support him. My career is important. But I have to support him. And supporting him means spending more time with the kids finding a way to balance so that he can reflect because the demand on him is also high from back home, [and] there are expectations. (MC2 S3)

Women also insisted that other areas of their lives also defined them as women, including as scholars and human beings. That what it means to be a “woman” is to be seen as a “full human being.” For example, Speaker 3 commented that universities should,

take into consideration the fact that [FIGSMs] have challenges [in] our lives [that] are beyond just academia and for international students. [G]ender traditional roles . . . really plays a big part into how productive and how efficient [FIGSMs] can be. I'm not saying to give us room to graduate in 10 years when the average time is five years . . . but maybe try to be a bit more understanding and help us get resources that might help with being efficient. (MC2 S3)

Another example was offered by Speaker 3, who said,

I get it that [my advisors] want me to be efficient. And get out of here so that [they] can write my name as one more grad student that you have graduated. But I'm a full human being I have other aspects to me than just academia. (Interview 3 S3)

FIGSMs strived to fulfill multiple roles simultaneously and often felt as if they were failing in each one. Their identification of the challenges they experienced was tempered by their awareness that they were not victims but were proactively choosing to pursue graduate degrees. Despite this, FIGSMs described confronting disproportionately more barriers and being able to access considerably fewer supports while being held to the same standards as U.S.-born graduate students without children. FIGSMs' experiences shine a light on the unexamined expectations of

U.S. graduate programs, which originally were designed for U.S. men who either were single or had partners who took on all the responsibilities associated with the domestic sphere, including children rearing. My research illuminates this mismatch between those students for whom these graduate programs were originally designed and the realities of FIGSMs' lives. In short, though U.S. graduate programs want FIGSMs, and FIGSMs clearly contribute in meaningful ways to their graduate programs, the realities of FIGSMs' lives require that graduate programs make changes so the burdens of success are not primarily borne by FIGSMs and their families. As Speaker 3 noted,

I get it that you want me to be efficient. And get out of here so that you can write my name as one more grad student that you have graduated. But I'm a full human being I have other aspects to me than just academia. (Interview 3 S3)

Speaker 6 further illustrated the challenges of addressing multiple demands when she pointed to the ripple effects for her academic life when she went to a social event over the weekend with her husband, thus preventing her from finishing domestic chores that were required to prepare her four children for their school week.

I think it's too much for me because I told my husband with a PhD when the week starts like that, it's like it throws me off. So, if we have to go somewhere during the weekends, [and] Saturday [for instance] is my washing day where I wash all four [of my] kids' clothes, make sure they are ready to go on Sunday [to] church service after Sunday church service you are preparing ironing and preparing them for the week. So, if we have to go somewhere Friday, Saturday, Sunday, any of the days it brings a little pressure on me, so I think the social event is becoming too much for me. . . . I wish I wouldn't have gone but anytime I go it's rather a blessing to me it I'm bringing in food, it I'm bringing in good news, it's solving my problems for me because my husband is also helping me with the PhD program very well. He's always been very supportive. So if I don't go to such programs then he's also not doing anything because he goes there to also talk to people and socialize and see what happens after the two years whether he wants to stay or he wants to leave. . . . So I think it has its pros and cons but the good side is that you socialized but the bad side is Monday comes and you haven't been able to do your washing [and] you haven't been able to set the children up for the week. (Interview 6, S6)

Gender Norms and Expectations

Women reported being expected to take on the primary caregiving responsibilities for children and managing household tasks. This societal expectation created pressure for female graduate student mothers to prioritize family duties over academic pursuits and they have the burden to balance academic work and caregiving responsibilities, leading to feelings of overwhelm and stress. However, some had access to social support networks composed of other mothers, family members, and community resources, but these networks ended up reinforcing traditional gender roles and expectations (Interview 3 S3).

FIGSMs described how men faced fewer interruptions than women in their academic or professional careers due to fewer caregiving responsibilities, allowing them to maintain continuity in their studies or careers. For many FIGSMs, societal norms often prioritized men's professional roles. According to Speaker 5,

It usually would be maybe me in [my country], while he's here. And then it looks like here's the reverse. So, it's really, it's not your typical kind of situation . . . [and] because it's not your typical kind of a situation, the reference points you have [are] almost nonexistence, you do not have a lot of people who have done this to even benefit from their experiences. So, it's almost like a path less traveled, where you have to travel and figure out your way. So how is it going? It's just been a period of learning. For a period of discovery, and winging it, and hoping that we're making sense of, you know, the season we're in was definitely culturally awkward. (Interview 5 S5)

Another FIGSM stated “I’ve had some males [in the community] telling me, you know, when you get home by six, you can take care of the kids till 10. And then when they're in bed, you go back to work” (MC2 S3 17:21). However, she added:

First of all, sometimes these kids are not in bed by 10. Especially if the baby had a late nap. You’re screwed first of all. Second of all, if you had a long day, and you come home to another full-time job. Think, by 10pm you might not have the energy you think you have to be you know, I'm like, I'm not a robot. I can't function 24 hours. That's the part where I'm a human being. So, I can't just keep going. (MC2 S3 18:33)

She also added that,

When . . . the opposite sex is in that position, they expect you to really step up, and make sure that you give them the space to work. If they have to sleep in the lab, they will sleep in the lab, and when they come home, you better make sure that house is clean, and the food is ready. Because they are tired. They've worked hard. But as for me, as much as I'm tired when I get home . . . I need to get to that kitchen. Feed those kids put them in bed. . . . Yes, at the end of the day, I'm a human being because you know what? I'm tired. (Interview 3 S3)

Emotional Labor

My third cycle of coding deepened my understanding of the various roles FIGSMs play in their families and how these roles impact their mental health and well-being. The emotional labor of managing family responsibilities, particularly for female international graduate students, involved a range of tasks and challenges that went beyond the physical care of children and household duties, such as caregiving and managing family crises or emergencies. Female international graduate students often shouldered the primary responsibility for providing emotional support to their children and partners, especially during periods of transition or stress related to relocation and academic demands (Ward et al., 2001; Garcia, 2019; Interview 7 S7).

The entire family may need to navigate cultural differences and language barriers in communicating with family members, requiring additional emotional sensitivity and understanding (Interview 8 S8). Managing family crises or emergencies, such as illness or accidents, can be emotionally taxing for female international students, particularly when they are navigating unfamiliar healthcare systems or seeking support from a distance. Balancing academic commitments with caregiving responsibilities during times of crisis required significant emotional resilience and adaptability (MC 2 S3; FG1 S2).

FIGSMs described expending emotional labor for mediating cultural conflicts, managing expectations, and facilitating cross-cultural communication within their family unit. For this

reason, Speaker 7 encouraged FIGSMs to come to the United States before their families to allow themselves to acculturate a bit before bringing their family members to join them. She commented on the emotional toll that took on her because she missed her children; however, she still believes coming a few months before her family was the best decision she made (Interview 7, S7).

Balancing multiple cultural identities and roles as mothers, students, and immigrants was emotionally challenging for female international students, leading to feelings of cultural dissonance or identity crisis. Managing the emotional impact of cultural adjustment required self-reflection, resilience, and a supportive network of peers and mentors who understood their unique experiences. One FIGSM discussed the lack of a support system for her family in the location of her university by stating that,

There is not really a support system in [the university's town] for us. And that's something we rely heavily on for me to keep me sane. Otherwise, I would have gotten that by now. I've talked to a few grad students in [the university's town]. And like I said, a lot of them are single in [the university's town], which means even when they married, usually their spouses are back home with the kids. And they're here for school so that when they finish, if they decide to stay, that's when they bring their families. And we have very few grad students, like female grad students. . . . And we know the challenges are not always the same. And then most of the females that I've met, are not married, they're, you know, they're engaged, but they're not married [and] don't have kids. So, I feel like . . . we relate academically, but [not] on a social level. It's hard, right? Because I have challenges that they might empathize with but may not always understand. And I've tried to figure out if they are like, more African families, like graduate students, not really. I've inquired with my friends who live there, not really. So that's something that was personally discouraging. Because I'm like, I don't want to move up there with my family with my kids. And there's no one to support. (Interview 3, S3...)

Managing feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome required emotional labor in asserting one's value and advocating for support systems that accommodated diverse roles and identities. Balancing the demands of academic studies, research, and teaching with family

responsibilities required ongoing emotional labor in prioritizing tasks, setting boundaries, and managing time effectively (Interview 7 S7).

Data from the member checks in the form of the focus group and two individual member checks provided additional evidence of FIGSMs' emotional expenditures. In this case, FIGSMs spoke to the emotional labor required by being exposed to racism, hate, and discrimination, often experienced by students and their children as part of their acculturation to new U.S. communities.

Racism and Hate

This more sensitive and difficult material did not emerge until after I had interviewed the FIGSMs the first time. After I had a chance to build more rapport and trust with them, FIGSMs' conversations with each other began to include their descriptions of exposure to racism, in which they confirmed a collective experience of discrimination. Strength in numbers, and the courage of one to speak to the racism she experienced then catalyzed others to speak to their own experiences.

Racism and hate towards FIGSMs had far-reaching consequences that extended beyond individual experiences, affecting families, communities, and academic institutions. FIGSMs described the ways their experiences of racism and hate led to feelings of isolation, alienation, and discrimination among FIGSMs, impacting their sense of community and support networks. FIGSMs' fear of discrimination or hate incidents led to their hypervigilance and feelings of insecurity in academic and social settings.

I have even been hated in school. When I was working with one white supervisor, you know, and I'm even afraid to talk about it. You can go into details, because whoever you are talking to, is also of the same thing. They may look like we are concerned we want to

hear, but you don't know what they will think. I just went and said...I don't think I can do the work you have given me [and requested to be changed because my faculty supervisor] hated me so much [and it seemed everything I did was wrong]. [She] even made me believe that [how I pronounced] my own name...[was] wrong. So much hatred. I have never seen this before. I mean, so eventually I was laid off. And [I worried about my stipend because it meant] that I won't be paid. (MC1 S8, 17:48)

The FIGSM went on to describe enduring effects of being discriminated against for her feelings about the U.S. generally,

Whatever happened in my department [has] really taken all my joy and my happiness from America. Honestly, . . . I don't know. . . . I'm hanging on. I want to see if I can go somewhere else or go back [to my country]. Yeah, I was hated so much. . . . And I'm afraid. . . . They do all this to you and they will say come and talk about mental stress. Come in and talk to someone you trust and so on. But I still feel very insecure. (MC1 S8, 17:48)

This statement of fear made me ask what the student feared and whether she was scared that the faculty/supervisor may do something to prevent her graduation. She answered that,

They can't do that? . . . because number one, I am an exceptional, excellent student. If the thing is correct, it is correct. It's not like she didn't, or she almost said this. . . . But the point is, how do I feel when I see them? And I feel very uncomfortable. I feel like they have taken all my joy and my hope out. (MC1 S8, 32:04)

This student, like other FIGSMs, had her relationship with her program and the United States fundamentally shaped by her discriminatory experience with her faculty supervisor.

Microaggression, Hate and their Effects on FIGSMs

FIGSMs also described their experiences with microaggressions and how they responded to them. “Like if you watch history, it’s the same thing. I mean, it doesn't matter how intelligent I am. I'm from somewhere [different]—my skin color, my hair, my looks no matter the [makeup] you put on” (MC1 S8, 54:33). This experience of being othered got more complicated when Speaker 8 returned to her home country, only to be perceived as “American” rather than as a compatriot,

The small microaggressions, you learn to ignore. But it doesn't mean that you don't see it, or you don't feel it, you just decide to ignore it. That's my way of dealing with it—and

venting with other friends. And I feel like I'm just in a place where sometimes I don't, I'm not sure where I belong. In the sense that when I'm home, I'm seen as the American. (MC2 S8, 36:28)

Speaker 8 added that

I have to take a bus out [and I] sit with people sometimes my whole row nobody will sit by me because the people standing are all white. So, they are different than what I look [like]. Sometimes it looks funny. I don't want to think that's what they are thinking but what else? So, sometimes I wonder aside that, you know, there have been few times when I'm coming on a lawn or something. When somebody sees me like in a white community, you know that this is more of a white community. So, I go there to help some older people I work with just as a volunteer and I love helping them out. So sometimes some of them have dogs, I have to walk them for them. And it's a white community. So, when somebody who is white sees you is like, wow . . . it's a shock. And then the person will, you will see that the person has crossed to the far lane or to the far [lawn]. And then sometimes you wonder what is it because I'm not wearing a hoodie. I'm not looking strange. I don't look like a suspect who is coming to kill or stab or do anything. But, you know, you meet some of these things. . . . They say, oh, maybe I should buy them something in a supermarket and you go and everybody is white. . . . So when they see us like, they are surprised, you know? Yeah, but I'm not surprised to see them. So sometimes, you know, it shows on their faces and all that. So sometimes it annoys me that, yeah, why should I look different because we are human beings anyway... [It may be possible that you] may not see a lot of black people, but you shouldn't be surprised to see one because we you know that they are around [and] the they are human beings. I don't know why back home [it feels like] we are all the same [but not in the U.S.]. (MC1 S8, 17:48)

Social Determinants of Health

Taken together, the barriers FIGSMs described in their lives constituted a constellation of stressors that contributed to the most prevalent theme to emerge from qualitative analyses:

FIGSMs' poor mental health. These determinants intersected in complex ways, shaping their access to resources, opportunities, and support systems. As their children grew older, the responsibilities and pressures of parenting changed and sometimes intensified, adding to FIGSMs' overall stress levels.

Implications of SDOH for Mental Health

Anxiety and Depression. The cumulative effect of academic, parenting, financial, and cultural challenges can lead to high levels of anxiety and depression. Symptoms may include persistent sadness, feelings of hopelessness, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. As one FIGSM said,

I'm afraid . . . [and I don't see] why . . . I have to [constantly] meet people [who] remind me of something that makes me very uncomfortable. It was a very bad experience [in my lab]. I don't know . . . the extent to which it has affected me emotionally. But [one thing I know is that] I wouldn't want to see myself around [my university]. If not in America, then I must think of somewhere else just to [go] . . . [and even] if I will stay [in the US], [I will enroll in a] totally different major. So that [the abuser and I] don't even cross paths. (MC1 S8 49:14)

Burnout. The relentless demands of balancing multiple roles often resulted in burnout. Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. One FIGSM asked, “How can I say my efficiency doesn't depend on my family? How can somebody who's had five, six hours of sleep . . . [be] the same as somebody who's had two three hours of sleep?” (MC2, S3, 13:40). Another FIGMS compares this burnout to the metaphor of psychology research,

One medical doctor was talking about the very intelligent people at some points were subjected to mentor institutions and they were made to crack rocks for a long time, after some time, they all became kind of mentally subdued or. . . So, if like, I come and put through settings, you said I shouldn't wait. So where do I get extra money? It's not like you are giving me an accommodation. I have to pay for one, I have to pay bills. You know, you give me my boss. Sometimes he gives me some of the food. How do I do the rest of the things that is left? Clothing? What happens? In academic materials? Like maybe a laptop, a new something you need to support yourself? How do you go about the textbooks? We bought textbooks. One textbook, I remember was more than \$200. I ended [up buying]. But some were supposed to buy many other books that I didn't because it was nonsense to me. And how do we coin all this money to do that? Yeah. So, you are causing the mental stress. And I need to go for mental health [counseling]. (MC1, S8, 33:28)

Physical Health problems. Chronic stress and poor mental health often manifested as physical health problems, including headaches, gastrointestinal issues, and weakened immune functions, creating a vicious cycle that further impacted mental well-being. Speaker 8 expressed that universities “purposely make you go mad. And the[n] encourage you to go for mental health [checkups]” (MC1 S8, 33:13).

So, the health center is kind of the university's clinic or hospital. So, you can go in, alright . . . but you pay for consultation, if there should be labs you pay, if they should be medicines you buy. [However,] if you have any mental issue, like you don't feel well, or you want someone to talk to, [they have created a therapeutic environment for that]. [They] have some sunlight and spa so that you can also access and zoom [options for therapy]. That one is free, I think for the recreation and exercises in the gym and all those and you just pay something small because you're a student, but for the health, if you are unwell, [you] will have to pay for everything. (MC1 S8 37:32)

Inner Strength: “I will not be looking like my problems when you meet me on campus in my African print looking pretty good”

FIGSMs exhibited remarkable inner strength, resilience, and determination. Despite facing significant challenges, they navigate their demanding academic responsibilities, parenting duties, and the complexities of living in a foreign country with extraordinary courage and perseverance.

These women often adapted to new cultural environments, learning to navigate different social norms, languages, and academic systems while ensuring their children also adjusted smoothly. They developed strong problem-solving skills to manage the various challenges they faced, such as finding childcare, handling financial constraints, and balancing their multiple roles.

Despite encountering numerous obstacles, such as visa issues, discrimination, or academic setbacks, they persisted in their goals, demonstrating a steadfast commitment to their

education and their families. They continually learned and grew, both academically and personally, often turning challenges into opportunities for development. They often juggled multiple roles simultaneously, from conducting research and attending classes to taking care of their children's needs, showcasing their exceptional organizational skills and dedication, all while demonstrating deep empathy and compassion, providing emotional support to their children, helping them adjust to new environments, and coping with their own challenges.

FIGSMs' drive to achieve academic success was often fueled by a deep intrinsic motivation, rooted in a passion for their field of study and a desire to contribute meaningfully to their discipline. I reflected on the particular code of "other" in which I placed excerpts that were meaningful to FIGSMs but that did not conform to the codes I had developed. I realized that the "other" excerpts were instances of students telling me their "whys." When they felt challenged, they circled back to their whys, which served as their anchor. To them, it was not enough that they get a degree; what matters is that they have contributed to knowledge that matters to them. As Speaker 7 stated,

I can be stubborn, sometimes, I could have changed the topic and said, okay, because of the why it was like, okay, I need to change my topic into something I could do within the U.S. and remotely. I didn't because my whole goal and plan was to contribute knowledge to [my country]. Period. That is where a lot of gaps and missing knowledge are. I could have taken the easy way out, but I didn't. And wait, I'm paying for it. But I'm still proud of it. (Interview 7, S7)

That's my expertise. I know, Africa. You just helped me with the theories, you know, the theory is the same whether it's in the U.S. or in Africa or elsewhere. So, you know, the idea of, like, some people showing that they don't know, is, as it's like, something not like I thought, not knowing is part of why we are here to learn. And yeah, yeah, that's all in the past. You know . . . how I dealt with that, at the end of the day. It took me a long time before I actually grew into that. And those moments were part of, I have to say, but you know, I said, okay, they might not hear me, but they are not going to silence me. So, if I am passionate about a topic or something . . . I don't care whether they hear me or not, but at least it's not festering inside me. I'm not keeping it in. Take putting it out there. (Interview 7, S7)

FIGSMs also were driven by the desire to set a positive example for their children, demonstrating the importance of education, hard work, and perseverance. They utilized their cultural backgrounds as strengths, drawing on the values, traditions, and coping mechanisms from their home countries to navigate challenges in a new environment. Speaker 2 expressed her coping mechanism during the focus group meeting by stating that FIGSMs

come from a culture of, of don't go for counseling. So, if it's like going to hang your dirty linen out there. So, you kind of . . . work these things out by yourself. Which is not very easy. Because then again, you have academic supervisors, but you don't know whether that is a good space to actually tell them this is what [you are] going through. This is how I'm trying to handle this. But I've been very grateful to the professors that I've had so far, because whenever I'm late with my assignments, I just let them know because I'm also I'm also have partial hearing. So that also adds to my issues to certain class, sometimes people talk and I can't hear them because of the distance. There's a lot of things and you have to factor all these things in and it can get you to a very tight corner. So I'm still trying to I try to work out ways to go about it and try to like tell myself, okay, you my problems. Okay, you've decided you don't want to live without me. That's okay. But let's do this. It's Monday. You gonna stay at home, and with going to campus, do my things. Then when we get to weekend, we'll meet and we can talk we can probably drink something or we could dance to some music and try to see whether we can have a relationship. . . . I'm crazy like that actually talking about problems in the mirror is crazy, but I do it. Like I literally summon them and ask them Okay, so you what's the problem? . . . Yeah, and sometimes I equally just call my daughter and ask her [if there's a way she] can make my academic life a bit better than how you're doing it here because, I'm a student like you. [T]here are times when it's bad, [and] I don't want to go anywhere, I just sort of sit down in the house and cry, [and when I'm] done, I go to the kitchen and make myself cake and eat alone, pick myself good food, post pictures [on social media]. And that's how my parents would be thinking I have a lot of money [when in actual fact, I am only trying to] make the whole thing work for me. . . . A lot of times I tell my colleagues I can, I can't kill myself. . . . I'm not going to allow education to stress me out. And so, they always look at me and think that I have things figured out. No, I have just decided no, no, no, no, no, you're not stressing me out. If my assignment is late, I'm walking to the professor and telling them, my assignment is late. And you're gonna have to give me time to finish it up. I'm a PhD student, not undergrad, undergrad is different. (FG1 S2 1:01:31)

She added that she puts

humor in a lot of my issues. So, I don't want to be walking around with them. Like sitting around conference looking like oh, no, no, no, I'm not going to be looking like that. No, I will not be looking like my problems when you meet me on campus in my African print

looking pretty good. Like, I have everything figured out and I have nothing [figured out]. (FG1 S2 1:07:14)

Impacts of FIGSM Social, Immigration, Economic, and Academic Supports, Opportunities, and Barriers on Children

The impacts of social, immigration, economic, academic, and psychosocial factors on FIGSMs are deeply linked to the experiences of FIGSMs' children.

Impact of Academic Barriers on Children

Access to high-quality K-12 education, supportive learning environments, and academic resources can positively impact children's academic performance, cognitive development, and long-term educational attainment. (Interview 8 S8)

Children benefit from parental involvement in their education, including academic support, encouragement, and positive role modeling, which fosters a love of learning and academic achievement. Limited access to educational resources, tutoring, or extracurricular activities may hinder children's academic progress and opportunities for enrichment (Interview 8 S8; Interview 6 S6).

Opportunities for social interaction and friendship-building contribute to children's social skills, self-confidence, and sense of belonging within peer groups and communities; however, social isolation or difficulties in forming friendships due to cultural or language barriers had a negative impact on FIGSMs' children's self-esteem and emotional well-being (Interview 1 S1; Interview 8 S8).

Immigration for Children

Immigration barriers, visa restrictions, and delays in family reunification processes can lead to prolonged separation from one or both parents, impacting children's emotional stability

and family dynamics. FIGSMs reported that changes in immigration policies, visa regulations, or uncertainties surrounding legal status created anxiety, stress, and insecurity for children, impacting their overall well-being and sense of stability. Results also provided evidence that FIGSM children who were high school juniors and seniors experienced more immigration barriers compared to other age groups (FG1 S1).

The Social Domain: Children

FIGSMs reported that access to supportive communities, cultural events, and social activities facilitated their children's integration into their new environment and promoted friendships with peers from diverse backgrounds. Exposure to different cultures, languages, and traditions enriched their children's understanding of their own cultural identity and fostered a sense of global citizenship. (Interview 3 S3; Interview 1 S1)

Children benefitted from strong social support networks, including family, peers, and community resources, which provided stability, nurturing relationships, and opportunities for learning and socialization in their home countries. Therefore, isolation due to geographic or cultural factors affected children's social and emotional development, sometimes leading to feelings of loneliness or difficulties in forming relationships. Relocating to a new country and navigating unfamiliar cultural norms, languages, and educational systems (acculturation stressors) also posed challenges for children, affecting their academic performance, self-confidence, and sense of belonging. (FG1 S2; Interview 3 S3)

The Economic Domain: Children

FIGSMs reported that economic barriers, such as high living expenses, limited access to affordable childcare, or parents' financial constraints impacted children's access to basic needs, educational opportunities, and extracurricular activities. Socioeconomic factors, including access

to healthcare, nutritious food, safe housing, and recreational facilities influenced children's physical health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life.

Impact of FIGSM Stress on Children

FIGSMs described that balancing academic commitments, work responsibilities, and family obligations affected their ability to actively participate in their children's education, attend school events, or provide academic support at home. Cumulative stressors that FIGSMs experienced can have ripple effects on their children's behavioral, mental, and physical health. When parents are not available to provide consistent monitoring, supervision, positive engagement, and appropriate discipline, children face greater risks for poor outcomes. Adolescents may experience mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, or stress related to family dynamics, cultural identity, academic pressures, or social isolation (Smith & McMahon, 2013). In contrast, FIGSMs also described positive parent-child relationships and open communication, which contributed to adolescents' emotional well-being and resilience in navigating challenges, such as peer pressure, academic stress, and identity development.

In addition to sharing a wealth of insights regarding the barriers they and their children experienced, FIGSMs also had extensive reflections on their supports and opportunities, with specific recommendations for improvements universities could make.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Services in U.S. Institutions of Higher Education

In response to RQ3 regarding recommendations for improvements by U.S. institutions of higher education, FIGSMs had several suggestions with implications for policy, practice, and services. By advocating for policy changes, implementing inclusive practices, and expanding support services, FIGSMs presented ideas that together would help U.S. universities create environments that foster the academic success, well-being, and inclusion of FIGSMs' families,

contributing to more diverse, equitable, and supportive higher education landscapes. Below are FIGSMs' responses.

Flexible Deadlines, Part-Time Enrollment, and Cultural Competency Training

Participants offered several academic suggestions aimed at improving the support structure for female international graduate students with children (FIGSMs). These suggestions are geared towards making academic environments more accommodating and supportive for FIGSMs. They expressed that rigid deadlines often conflict with their family obligations. Speaker 4 suggested flexible deadlines and extensions for assignments and projects can help accommodate the dual responsibilities of parenting and academics.

Participants recommended that universities offer part-time enrollment options without jeopardizing visa status or financial aid eligibility, which can alleviate some of the academic pressures. Participants also emphasized the importance of having advisors and faculty members who are understanding and flexible regarding their dual responsibilities. U.S. institutions can provide cultural competency training for faculty and staff, including Ombuds services, and student service providers, to enhance their understanding of the unique experiences, needs, and challenges faced by FIGSMs.

Financial Aid Policies and Financial Support

Interviewees identified that establishing scholarships and grants specifically for international graduate student parents can help mitigate financial pressures and support FIGSMs. In addition, universities can create emergency funds to provide crucial assistance during difficult times to support students facing unexpected financial challenges. Universities can also reform financial aid policies to address the financial barriers faced by FIGSMs, including access to

need-based aid, scholarships, and emergency financial assistance. Additionally, participants felt that the need for a reform in the Graduate Employee (GE) stipend structure as each GE receives the same stipend regardless of family size, and this is not equitable, which makes admission accessible, but retention becomes a problem (Interview 7 S7). They also identified that providing international student jobs on campus, using the example of the Midwest university where they opened up low-paying jobs for summer to accommodate international students' summer financial needs was an example of providing for the financial needs of students. Domestic students can find jobs outside campus. International students cannot.

Immigration Policy and Legal Assistance

A common recommendation was the need for universities to provide access to legal assistance and immigration counseling services to assist FIGSMs with visa applications, immigration status changes from student to work visas, and navigating complex immigration processes (Interview 4 S4). Additionally, universities can advocate for immigration policies that support family reunification, support stability and success of FIGSMs by working with USCIS to streamline visa processes for dependents and provide flexibility for spouses to attain work permits.

Childcare Assistance Childcare and Family Services

One of the most frequently mentioned suggestion was the need for more affordable and flexible childcare services. Universities can develop policies to expand access to more affordable, playground on campuses, high-quality childcare services on campus or in the community, including subsidies, flexible scheduling options, and emergency childcare support for FIGSMs. Additionally, universities can implement family-friendly policies that accommodate

the needs of FIGSMs, such as parental leave (that do not impact their student status), lactation support, family housing options, and child-friendly campus facilities.

Support Services, Orientation Programs, Community Development, and Advocacy

Many participants felt that universities should have dedicated offices or staff to support student parents, providing tailored advice and assistance to help FIGSMs acclimate more easily by organizing comprehensive orientation programs before FIGSMs arrive in the U.S. that include information on navigating cultural adjustments, K-12 support, and accessing campus resources.

Participants called for the expansion of support services for FIGSMs, including providing an office specifically for their needs, orientation programs, academic advising, counseling services, and family-focused programming to promote social integration, academic success, and well-being.

Participants also suggested the establishments of structured support networks by fostering partnerships with community organizations, such as churches, city centers, cultural centers, and international student associations to create inclusive environments, promote cross-cultural exchange, and provide resources and support for FIGSMs and their families.

Participants noted the need for U.S. institutions to advocate for the needs of FIGSMs at the institutional, local, and national levels through policy advocacy, research, and awareness campaigns to raise visibility and address systemic barriers.

Create a Director of Services for Students with Children Position

This position not only provides support for FIGSMs, but support for all nontraditional students in U.S. institutions. By providing this resource, the needs of all students with children will be taken care of, including FIGSMs. For FIGSMs, it is important to have a safe place where

can speak up about racism, discrimination, and hate and discuss negative experiences with faculty and supervisors.

What the Director of Services for Students with Children will Do/Letter to FIGSMs

1. Provide tools to FIGSMs to help them succeed, such as:

- a. How to set limits and prioritize self-care to prevent burnout and preserve wellbeing by providing strategies, such as conveying availability to peers, colleagues, and supervisors to manage expectations and avoid overcommitting, exercising, taking pauses, and spending time with loved ones and friends (Smith & Garcia, 2020).
- b. How to manage time effectively, which includes setting priorities for tasks, making lists of things to do, breaking down more difficult jobs into smaller ones, and setting out certain times for socializing, work, and personal activities in order to keep a balanced schedule (MC1 S8)
- c. How to develop delegation skills and know when to ask for assistance. Because of their culture, FIGSMs often do not know how to ask for assistance. Teach them to get help for their mental health when they need it (FG1 S2) and determine whether duties or responsibilities, such as housework, childcare, or academic obligations, can be assigned to others.
- d. How to speak up for your requirements and, where required, request modifications or accommodations to handle the demands of your job and preserve their well-being (MC1 S8)

- e. How to prevent overextending yourself and putting yourself under unnecessary stress, set reasonable expectations for yourself and others regarding what you can realistically do in a given amount of time (FG1 S2). Take advantage of opportunities to network and socialize in your academic and professional life. Examples include going to conferences, seminars, or social events connected to your field of study or employment (Interview 2 S2).
- f. Set realistic expectations for yourself and others regarding what you can accomplish within a given timeframe and be transparent about your limitations and boundaries to avoid overextending yourself and experiencing undue stress (FG1 S2).
- g. Cultivate supportive relationships with fellow graduate students, colleagues, and peers who understand and empathize with your challenges. Participate in social events, networking opportunities, or support groups specifically tailored to FIGSMs to connect with others who share similar experiences. Explore opportunities for integrating socialization and networking into your academic and professional life, such as attending conferences, seminars, or social gatherings related to your field of study or work (FG1 S2).
- h. Juggling socialization with the duties of graduate and academic work necessitates deliberate planning, efficient time management, and assistance from peers, managers, and support systems. International graduate student mothers can manage the demands of a heavy workload without sacrificing their well-being or social networks by emphasizing self-care, communicating clearly, assigning

responsibilities to others, and cultivating supportive relationships. Remind yourself that in order to manage stress and achieve a better balance between your personal and academic lives, it's OK to give priority to self-care and to seek help when necessary (FG1 S2).

- i. Plan mental health workshops and seminars with a focus on FIGSMs' needs. Include information on coping mechanisms, stress management, and the value of getting treatment.
 - j. Create in-depth manuals that describe all of the services and resources for mental health that are accessible as well as how to get them. Make these handouts available via digital media and during orientation.
2. Serve as liaison between K-12 and U.S. universities.
 3. Serve as an orientation specialist. Too often FIGSMs become de facto ambassadors providing information on resettlement, transportation, transitions who are not financially compensated for this emotional work, as in the case of Speaker 3, where she felt the need to promote the department. But at the same time, [she] knew the position the student was going to be in. [She] felt bad about sharing the conflict. The school part is great but another reality outside school are the limitations. (MC2 S3...)
 3. Provide affordable summer camp lists and childcare avenues for FIGSMs and parent graduate students.
 4. Create an acculturation matrix for K-12 schools.
 5. Create an acculturation & support matrix for ISSS offices.

Institutions Should Ask Women What They Want

In U.S. universities, efforts to advance gender equity and inclusivity frequently concentrate on removing structural obstacles and fostering diversity, but they can ignore the unique difficulties faced by women who are also mothers. The voices and experiences of FIGSMs should be given priority in advocacy campaigns to advance gender equity in higher education. To address the structural obstacles and disparities that FIGSMs experience, gender-sensitive policies and initiatives are crucial. These include actions that encourage work-life balance, equitable access to resources, and acknowledgement of caregiving obligations (CITE).

In comparison to males, FIGSMs encounter a variety of obstacles that are shaped by their gender. These barriers might affect their academic experiences, career paths, social dynamics, and institutional contexts. Acknowledging and removing these hurdles based on gender necessitates a comprehensive strategy that tackles underlying systemic disparities, questions established gender norms, and advances inclusive policies and practices in educational institutions and larger social contexts (Brown, 2004). Finally, establishing cultural competency, empathy, and allyship in academic settings helps FIGSMs and their families feel supported and included. (Smith, 2009)

Professional Development Training for New Faculty

To support FIGSMs in maintaining a work-life balance and well-being, faculty members and advisors must be ready to listen, understand, and make allowances for their personal and caregiving obligations. Thus, work-life balance-promoting laws and procedures, including flexible work schedules, paid time off, or childcare assistance, help create an environment where these women can thrive in the classroom (Springer et al., 2009). When working with FIGSMs,

faculty members and advisors should be sensitive to cultural differences and show cultural competency by acknowledging and honoring their varied experiences, values, and histories.

FIGSMs can flourish academically and professionally when inclusive practices and diversity initiatives are supported in academic departments and research groups. This builds a sense of community and belonging. All students and faculty members benefit from an enhanced academic experience when different perspectives, collaborative learning, and cross-cultural exchanges are encouraged (Turner et al., 2008).

Childcare Challenges Hinder Socialization

Navigating childcare challenges can make socializing difficult for FIGSMs. Here are some strategies to address childcare barriers and create opportunities for socialization:

1. Flexible socialization options: Explore options such as virtual meeting and providing child-friendly events (Interview 8 S8).
2. Childcare support: Explore the possibility of starting a parenting co-op with other graduate student parents. In this arrangement, you can alternate watching each other's kids so that you can socialize and pursue your academic goals. You can also establish a support system of reliable parents who can help each other and lessen the burden of childcare (Lynch, 2008).
3. Campus resources: Offer childcare vouchers or financial assistance programs to support FIGSMs with childcare expenses. Provide on-campus daycare facilities or subsidized childcare programs to assist with childcare during academic and social activities. Subsidies are not the full solution because finding childcare is the number one barrier with the financial part as an added layer (Springer et al., 2009).

Family Friendly Events for FIGSMs and their Children Aged 0-10 and 11-18

By organizing a diverse range of family-friendly events, universities can create inclusive and supportive environments that cater to the needs and interests of female graduate students with children. These events provide opportunities for socializing and community building and also promote well-being, cultural enrichment, and academic success for FIGSMs and their families (Springer et al., 2009).

Host workshops or seminars led by experts in child development, parenting strategies, and work-life balance tailored to the needs of graduate student parents. Cover topics such as positive discipline, managing stress, fostering resilience, and navigating academic and parenting responsibilities (Springer et al., 2009).

Establish peer-led support groups or discussion circles where graduate student parents can connect, share experiences, and offer each other advice and encouragement. Provide a supportive environment for discussing common challenges, seeking advice, and building a sense of community among FIGSMs (Springer et al., 2009).

Organize family-friendly outdoor events such as picnics, barbecues, or nature walks on university grounds or nearby parks. Provide activities like games, crafts, or storytelling to engage children and encourage interaction among families.

Host themed family fun days with activities, games, and entertainment tailored to children's interests, such as superhero parties, science fairs, or arts and crafts festivals. Invite graduate student families to participate in planning and organizing the event to ensure it meets their preferences and needs.

Events for FIGSMs with Children Aged 0-10

Plan outdoor activities that are suitable for the whole family, such as barbecues, picnics, and nature walks in the parks or on university property. To engage kids and promote family engagement, offer games, crafts, or storytelling activities. Organize family fun days with themes that cater to the interests of the young children. Examples of these are scientific fairs, superhero parties, and arts and crafts festivals. To guarantee that the event suits their needs and interests, invite the families of graduate students to take part in its development and coordination. (Lynch, 2008)

Organize cultural festivals or international food fairs that highlight various foods, customs, and performances from around the globe to celebrate diversity and cultural heritage. Give graduate student families the chance to experience a joyful, welcoming environment where they can discover and enjoy one another's cultures.

Provide interactive learning opportunities or family-friendly educational workshops that involve parents and kids in practical exercises and experiments such as storytelling sessions, art classes, that can be fun for both FIGSMs and their children.

Organize family movie nights with kid- and adult-friendly documentaries or films. Create a warm and welcoming ambiance with popcorn and snacks so FIGSMs and their family may unwind together in the evening.

Get FIGSMs together to share recipes, eat together, and mingle over a relaxed meal at family potluck dinners or food-sharing events. To foster variety and culinary interchange, invite families to bring foods that represent their ethnic heritage.

Events for FIGSMs with Children Aged 11-18

Organize panel discussions or career exploration seminars to educate FIGSMs' teenage children about various industries, career options, and educational prospects. In order to provide direction and motivation for the aspirations of the teenage participants, invite professionals, graduates, or faculty members to discuss their career adventures and perspectives.

Plan college readiness activities or seminars that give FIGSMs' high school students information and resources about financial aid, international student status, standardized testing, college applications, and admissions requirements. Provide college essay writing workshops, resume building workshops, and college interview preparation workshops to assist the teenagers in making an informed move to higher education (Interview 1 S1).

Teenagers who want to explore their artistic talents should be offered music, art, or creative writing programs. Give teenagers the chance to develop new abilities, engage in creative self-expression, and work with peers in a welcoming environment. Teens can get involved in environmental conservation programs or sustainability initiatives by planning events like beach clean-ups, tree planting, or habitat restoration.

Provide fitness programs or sporting activities, such yoga, dance, martial arts, or team sports that are especially catered to the interests and skill levels of teenagers. Give teenagers the chance to engage in physical activity and leisure pursuits as a way to keep active, form healthy habits, and foster peer friendships.

Organize talks or workshops on adolescent mental health and wellbeing, including approaches to stress reduction, coping mechanisms, self-care, and mindfulness. Provide an

environment that is encouraging and judgment-free so that teenagers can talk freely about their feelings, struggles, and experiences while also learning how to preserve their mental health.

Opportunities and Supports for Female International Graduate Student Mothers and their Children

There are several opportunities and supports available for FIGSMs and these include:

Enhanced organizational and Time Management Skills; Scholarships, Grants, Financial Aid, and Scholarship Availability; Strong Motivation; Adaptability and Resilience; Role Modeling; Route to Long-Term Residency and Global Mobility; and Institutional Support.

Juggling parental and academic obligations improves time management abilities. FIGSMs frequently develop a high level of productivity at work, which is advantageous in both academic and professional contexts. Certain academic institutions provide grants and scholarships only to students from overseas. These financial aid options can relieve some financial strain and supply the tools required for academic achievement. Financial help is specifically offered by some organizations and institutions to international students and student-parents. Financial stress can be reduced, and their educational path can be supported by having access to these resources.

The aspiration of FIGSMs to give their kids a better future can serve as a strong incentive for academic success. This intense drive frequently results in significant levels of commitment and persistence in their academic pursuits (Interview 3 S3; Interview 6 S6).

Overcoming the difficulties of being a FIGSM promotes adaptability and resilience. These qualities are beneficial in both personal and professional spheres in addition to academic

ones (FG 1 S2). Hence, FIGSMs act as exemplars for their communities and families. Their quest for a college degree highlights the significance of lifelong learning and serves as an example for their kids and other community members on the necessity of education (Interview 7 S7).

After earning an advanced degree in the United States, one may be able to obtain a work visa or permanent residency, which can lead to long-term stability and prospects for professional growth. FIGSMs' foreign experience and credentials from the U.S. can improve their global mobility by enabling them to secure jobs and residency opportunities abroad. (Interview 5 S5; Interview 3 S3)

Parenting support groups, family housing, and on-campus childcare are just a few of the family-friendly policies and initiatives that certain U.S. universities offer. FIGSMs can greatly enhance their quality of life with these resources. For international student-parents, having access to career services, academic advising, and counseling can be crucial in offering support and direction. FIGSMs can find convenient and reasonably priced childcare options through on-campus childcare facilities or subsidized childcare. Certain on-campus jobs, like research or teaching assistantships, pay well and are flexible enough to work around caregiving obligations and academic schedules (Interview 3 S3). Some institutions have specialized personnel or departments that assist student-parents, as well as FIGSMs in general. This guarantees that their particular requirements are fulfilled and that they have representatives within the establishment (Miller & Gault, 2011 p. 11).

By encouraging cultural sensitivity, raising knowledge of resources that are accessible, facilitating better access to mental health treatments, and guaranteeing anonymity and assistance that is specifically catered to the needs of FIGSMs, universities can play a critical role in

removing these obstacles. University environments that support mental health can help these individuals succeed both academically and personally (MC 1 S8).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will focus on key findings from my deductive and inductive data analyses and engage those themes in relation to the literature. Then, I will consider the implications of my study findings for improved practices in U.S. universities. The female international graduate students who are mothers in my study identified critical social determinants that shaped the most important aspects of their experiences as FIGSMs, including gender, acculturation, immigration, financial, family, and psychosocial factors that led to their high stress and poor mental health. These determinants had ripple effects for their children as well. Providing comprehensive support services, addressing barriers, and creating inclusive environments are essential for promoting FIGSMs' well-being and for their children's overall health, academic success, and development. By recognizing and addressing the unique strengths, needs, and challenges faced by international student families, universities can enhance the experiences and outcomes of children growing up in diverse cultural and academic settings. As important, universities can better ensure that the female international graduate students they have admitted have an equal opportunity to learn, achieve, and prosper within their programs and lives.

FIGSMs face a myriad of challenges that significantly impact their academic and personal lives. Economic barriers such as high living costs and limited financial aid strain their financial resources, often delaying degree completion and reducing academic focus. Academically, rigid schedules and a lack of tailored support impede their performance and research opportunities, leading to potential dropout. Sociocultural barriers, including cultural adjustment and language difficulties, can contribute to acculturative stress and mental health

issues, exacerbating feelings of isolation. Immigration hurdles like visa restrictions and family separation further heighten stress levels and financial dependency. These combined factors can result in physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, significantly affecting FIGSMs' overall well-being and academic success.

To address these multifaceted challenges, a comprehensive support system involving government policies, university practices, and community initiatives is essential. Federal immigration policies should be more inclusive, provide more flexible visa requirements, work permits for spouses, and offer pathways to permanent residency for FIGSMs and their families, thereby reducing the uncertainties and stresses associated with visa limitations. Collaborations between immigration authorities and universities can streamline the process of acquiring necessary documents and services, reducing bureaucratic hurdles that often complicate the lives of international students. Enhanced educational funding, as well as government policies such as subsidized childcare, flexible work arrangements for parents, and accessible healthcare services would benefit FIGSMs, as well as many other heads of families. Additionally, advocacy for policy changes could create a more supportive environment for FIGSMs in the U.S. Redesigned policies such as these above would alleviate financial burdens and provide essential resources that FIGSMs need to balance their academic and parenting responsibilities effectively.

Within communities, initiatives can focus on creating inclusive spaces that accommodate the diverse needs of FIGSMs. This includes establishing community centers or support groups specifically tailored to FIGSMs, where they can access resources, receive peer support, and participate in cultural integration programs. Local businesses and employers can also contribute by offering job opportunities and flexible work arrangements that accommodate parenting duties. By fostering a supportive community environment outside of the university setting, FIGSMs can

feel more connected and empowered to navigate both their academic and family responsibilities successfully. These collective efforts can significantly enhance FIGSMs' overall well-being and academic success, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive society.

Universities should offer flexible academic schedules, mental health services, and cultural competency training for faculty and staff. Access to affordable and reliable childcare could be expanded, making it possible for FIGSMs to attend social events, evening classes, study in the library after hours, and participate in academic activities. Community organizations and the private sector could contribute through childcare partnerships, flexible work options, and sponsorships. Programs such as Student-parent support groups, family-friendly events, expert-led workshops, and health and wellness services are vital in fostering a community where FIGSMs can balance their academic and parental responsibilities effectively.

Some universities have an Office of Services for Student Parents (OSSP). This office can be instrumental in providing tailored support to student parents, including FIGSMs. OSSP's primary role involves offering academic assistance, such as flexible scheduling, tutoring, and access to resources that enable student parents to balance their educational and parental responsibilities effectively. The office also plays a crucial role in coordinating affordable, on-campus childcare services, ensuring student parents can attend classes and focus on their studies while their children are cared for in a safe environment. Additionally, OSSP collaborates with various university departments to advocate for family-friendly policies, including parental leave and financial aid options, which help alleviate the financial and emotional burdens that student parents often face.

A key component of OSSP is the K-12 Liaison, a role specifically designed to address the educational needs of student parents' children. The K-12 Liaison facilitates connections between

student parents and local K-12 schools, ensuring their children receive the necessary educational support. This position involves guiding families through school enrollment processes, understanding educational requirements, and accessing additional resources such as tutoring and extracurricular programs. By fostering strong partnerships with local schools, the K-12 Liaison helps ensure a smooth transition and positive educational experiences for the children of student parents. This dual support system, combining the efforts of OSSP and the K-12 Liaison, addresses both the academic and familial needs of student parents, promoting their overall success and stability within the university community.

Table 2 below summarizes key challenges FIGSMs face and the opportunities for universities to address and ameliorate these challenges through new or better-designed policies, programs, and practices. This table could be a first step toward the creation of a manual for universities with best practice guidelines that address inclusive policies that cover the unique needs of FIGSMs. This manual could identify best practices and successful models of academic and faculty support that can be replicated across other departments and institutions and advocate for the creation of standardized support systems to ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities for FIGSMs.

Table 2. *The Krakani Model for Female International Graduate Students who are Mothers*

CHALLENGE	POLICIES/PROGRAMS/PRACTICE
Delayed graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocate for the needs of FIGSMs at the institutional, local, and national levels through policy advocacy, research, and awareness campaigns to raise visibility and address systemic barriers
Lack of social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster partnerships with community organizations, cultural centers, and international student associations to create inclusive environments, promote cross-cultural exchange, and provide resources and support for international student families Establishing mentorship programs that connect international student-parents with alumni or peers can provide additional support and guidance
Limited employment opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand financial aid programs and provide on-campus employment opportunities can help alleviate some of these economic pressures Offer scholarships and financial aid specifically for international student-parents to alleviate economic pressures Develop research fellowships that are specifically designed for FIGSMs, providing them with financial support and dedicated time for research

CHALLENGE	POLICIES/PROGRAMS/PRACTICE
Insufficient childcare facilities and after hour care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand childcare and family support services, including childcare subsidies, parenting workshops, family-friendly events, and referrals to community resources to meet the diverse needs of FIGSMs Offer comprehensive immigration assistance to help students manage these challenges effectively Provide affordable and accessible childcare options that are sensitive to the cultural needs of international families
Visa restrictions and immigration stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocate for immigration policies that support family reunification, support stability and success of FIGSMs by streamlining visa processes for dependents and providing pathways to attain work authorizations
High living expenses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer financial aid counseling and assistance with navigating financial aid applications, scholarships, grants, and emergency funds to alleviate financial burdens and support the educational aspirations of FIGSMs Providing affordable on-campus childcare or subsidies for childcare expenses can reduce financial burdens and associated stress
Poor mental health and marital strain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand support services for international student families, including orientation programs, academic advising, counseling services, and family-focused programming to promote social integration, academic success, and well-being Include mental health education in orientation programs for international students, addressing cultural stigmas and promoting the benefits of seeking support Conduct awareness campaigns to normalize the use of mental health services, highlighting stories of successful outcomes and emphasizing the importance of mental well-being
Lack of family-friendly policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement family-friendly policies that accommodate the needs of FIGSMs, such as parental leave, lactation support, family housing options, and child-friendly campus facilities Provide training for university staff and faculty to understand the cultural backgrounds and specific needs of international students, promoting a supportive environment
Insufficient support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand support services for FIGSMs, including orientation programs, academic advising, counseling services, and family-focused programming to promote social integration, academic success, and well-being Create the Director of Services for Students with children position
Ineligibility for public assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer targeted support services and resources Establishing emergency funds for unexpected financial crises can provide a safety net for these student
Racism, microaggressions, and hatred	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and enforce clear anti-discrimination policies that specifically address racism, microaggressions, and hate speech Implement mandatory cultural competency and anti-bias training for all faculty, staff, and students Conduct regular surveys to gather feedback from international students about their experiences with racism, microaggressions, and hate Use this feedback to inform policy changes and improve support services. Establish accountability measures to ensure that anti-discrimination policies are being enforced and that incidents are appropriately addressed
Gender inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocate for the needs of FIGSMs at the institutional, local, and national levels through policy advocacy, research, and awareness campaigns to raise visibility and address systemic barriers
Lack of empathy from faculty and supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide cultural competency training for faculty, staff, and student service providers to enhance their understanding of the unique experiences, needs, and challenges faced by FIGSMs Implement mandatory cultural competency and anti-bias training for all faculty, staff, and students
Lack of K-12 support for FIGSMs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include sessions on local K-12 education systems in university orientation programs for international students Organize workshops and seminars on topics such as navigating the US education system, understanding school policies, and supporting children's learning at home

In summary, this study's key finding is that FIGSMs struggle with poor psychosocial health as a consequence of having to navigate for themselves and their families complex and interrelated sociocultural, immigration, financial, and academic barriers. These barriers are social determinants of FIGSM health. FIGSMs' articulation of these barriers not only clarified their experiences of vulnerability but also their resourcefulness and resilience. FIGSMs' experiences both confirmed and expanded in important ways the existing literature on international female graduate students in the United States.

Gender: “I am a full human being.”

FIGSMs navigate multiple roles that include being scholars, parents, and individuals with personal aspirations and identities beyond motherhood. Acknowledging that women are full human beings outside of their roles as mothers is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive academic environment. This recognition helps for addressing their unique challenges and supporting their holistic well-being and success.

By recognizing that FIGSMs are full human beings with identities and aspirations beyond motherhood, universities foster a holistic supportive and inclusive academic environment that can help these women succeed in their academic and personal lives. This holistic and inclusive approach benefits FIGSMs and enriches the academic community by valuing diverse perspectives and experiences.

This study adds to the literature on gender (and in the process, challenges some of that literature) by highlighting the compounded effects of gender and parenthood on experiences of discrimination, emphasizing the need for universities to address gender-based discrimination and create inclusive environments that value diversity and inclusion. This research contradicts other scholars, including Lobnibe 2013, who found that FIGSMs first come to the United States on dependent visas and transition to graduate school while here. None of the eight graduate students I interviewed initially came to the US as spouses of graduate students. All of them came to the US to pursue their own graduate education.

Immigration Constrains Life Possibilities for FIGSMs and their Families

Immigration policies and constraints significantly impact the lives and opportunities of FIGSMs and their families. This study adds to literature on FIGSMs' immigration stressors by providing specific examples of how visa limitations increase financial difficulties. The study also

highlights the challenges posed by visa regulations, including restrictions on employment, limitations on the duration of stay, and financial difficulties associated with obtaining dependent visas for their children and spouses. Academically, FIGSMs may face restrictions on international travel, which can limit opportunities for research, conferences, and professional development. All of these specific examples illustrate the complexity and restrictiveness of visa regulations with implications for the financial and emotional stress for these students. This research also details the significant impact of dependent visa policies on FIGSMs and shows how difficulties in maintaining visas for family members can lead to prolonged periods of family separation. This insight highlights a critical area often overlooked in the literature: the importance of family unity for the well-being and academic success of mothers and calls for more family-friendly visa policies that allow spouses and working-age children of FIGSMs to work.

Opportunity Does Not Equal Accessibility (ODNEA)

Opportunity refers to the availability of resources, programs, and services that can potentially benefit individuals, such as academic programs, financial aid, and professional development opportunities. Accessibility refers to the actual ability of individuals to take advantage of these opportunities, which can be hindered by various barriers, such as financial constraints, logistical challenges, institutional policies, and sociocultural factors. Therefore, while opportunities for higher education in the United States are theoretically available to all, FIGSMs often face significant barriers that hinder their ability to fully access and benefit from them. This discussion explores the distinction between opportunity and accessibility, highlighting the specific challenges faced by FIGSMs and suggesting ways to bridge this gap. Universities can bridge the gap by acknowledging that although FIGSMs have opportunities to

socialize, they often cannot access these opportunities because of childcare barriers, strict academic deadlines, and time or the barriers FIGSMs' children experienced related to a lack of direction or support with available resources. Further, FIGSMs' access to needed services may be heightened and hindered by experiences of racism, microaggressions, and cultural insensitivity.

Acculturation

For FIGSMs, acculturation is a complex, multifaceted experience that affects every domain of their lives. International students often experience cultural shock when adjusting to a new cultural environment, which can manifest as confusion, anxiety, and homesickness. This adjustment can be particularly challenging when managing the demands of graduate studies and parenting. FIGSMs may feel socially isolated due to cultural differences and a lack of understanding or acceptance from peers. This isolation can be compounded by their limited time for social activities due to parenting responsibilities.

This study adds to literature on FIGSM acculturation by showing how cultural differences can add to academic barriers. International students may face difficulties adjusting to different educational systems, expectations, and norms, which can be compounded by the responsibilities of parenting (Kuo, 2011). In addition, while FIGSMs spoke to the stress caused by family separation, some students also viewed temporary separation as a strategic choice that allowed them to focus more intensively on their graduate programs. These students often planned for short-term separation with long-term reunification goals, which provides a more nuanced understanding of the impact of family separation (Myers-Walls, 2011; Interview 7 S7).

Further, this study's findings highlight a previously underexplored aspect of the sociocultural barriers faced by international students: the need for culturally sensitive parenting

resources and support systems to help these parents navigate their new environment (Alegría et al., 2018; Zang, 2021). Differences in acculturation trajectories between parents and children can create considerable stress for FIGSMs affecting parent-child relationships. Children may adapt more quickly to the new culture, leading to intergenerational conflicts and challenges in maintaining cultural heritage. Acculturation stress also can strain spousal relationships, especially if one partner adapts more quickly than the other, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts.

These findings add to the literature by providing detailed examples of how cultural adjustment impacts these students' academic and personal lives and emphasizes the need for cultural orientation programs and ongoing support to facilitate smoother transitions. This insight adds a cultural dimension to the literature by highlighting the intersectionality of culture, identity, and psychosocial well-being. It suggests that universities should provide orientation programs and ongoing support to address cultural adjustment issues for FIGSMs, as well as culturally competent counseling services that address the unique needs of FIGSMs. This study also adds depth to the literature by highlighting the educational experiences of FIGSMs' children (Garcia, 2019; Myers-Walls, 2011). It emphasized the need for K-12 schools and universities to provide resources and support services that address the unique needs of FIGSMs and their children, such as navigating the U.S. educational system, language assistance programs, and culturally responsive teaching practices.

This research contributes to the literature by showing how higher education levels among siblings and parents of FIGSMs can mitigate the economic strain on FIGSMs. It suggests that educational advancement within the family can have positive ripple effects on financial obligations and stress levels (FG1 S3; MC2 S3). This study adds to the literature by highlighting

the cultural norms and familial expectations that place additional burdens on eldest siblings, especially those studying abroad (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). It emphasizes the need for universities to recognize and address these unique cultural pressures.

Universities Could Do More to Lessen Burdens: “My efficiency has a lot to do with family.”

Enhancing support for female international graduate students who are mothers carries significant implications for the students themselves, their families, and the broader university community. Universities have a role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of FIGSMs. By implementing targeted support measures, universities can enhance academic success, improve mental health and well-being, foster social integration, and strengthen their institutional reputation. This study adds to literature on what universities through confirming that significant variability among universities exist in institutional support for FIGSMs, though it is often insufficient. It identifies examples of effective support practices, such as family-friendly policies and dedicated academic support, indicating that some institutions are more proactive and supportive than others. This partially confirms and extends the literature by showing that institutional support is not uniformly lacking and that best practices exist. The University of Oregon, for instance has a Graduate Employee position to support student families but not a dedicated office or permanent position for student-parents. Portland State University has a dedicated Assistant Director for Services position for student parents. This position, together with the ISSS office and graduate school will work together to solve majority of the barriers FIGSMs face. Universities without a position or office of this type could draw on the models of other universities to meet FIGSMs' unmet needs, such as the position at Portland State university, which provides support for student parents. The University of Wisconsin hosts a number of events, including zoom meetings for student parents and a faculty-driven winter

clothing drive for students and their families. They provide swimming classes and other educational opportunities that are subsidized for FIGSM children. To date, no university has been identified that provides information and support specifically for the needs of school age children and international graduate students. Finally, this study's findings enrich the literature by emphasizing the positive impact of community and religious institutions in the lives of FIGSMs. It suggests that universities should collaborate with local community organizations and religious groups to provide additional support for FIGSMs (Interview 6 S6).

Social Determinants of Poor Mental Health: “They purposely make you mad and then encourage you to go for mental health [counseling]”

Finally, FIGSMs often face common challenges confronted by international graduate students as well as a unique set of challenges related to their experiences as women and mothers that can adversely impact their mental health. This discussion delves into the primary factors contributing to their poor mental health because understanding these factors is crucial for developing effective support mechanisms.

FIGSMs often bear the dual responsibility of excelling in their academic pursuits while managing household duties and childcare, which traditionally fall more heavily on women. This dual role can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion. FIGSMs may encounter gender bias and discrimination within academic institutions, where their capabilities and contributions might be undervalued compared to their male and white counterparts. This can diminish their confidence and increase stress. The need to juggle multiple roles—student and mother—without adequate support systems can also lead to significant stress. The pressure to meet high expectations in both domains can result in burnout and mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression.

With regards to acculturation, adapting to a new cultural environment is often a challenging process involving language barriers, unfamiliar social norms, and a lack of support networks. At the same time, cultural differences and language barriers can hinder the development of social networks, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. This isolation can be more profound for mothers who might not have the same opportunities to socialize as other students due to childcare responsibilities. Additionally, their children's acculturation processes, particularly when difficult, can make FIGSMs' efforts to build new social ties even more complex.

This study adds to the literature on female international graduate students and international graduate students in general by bringing to light the stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation experienced by these students (Alegría et al., 2018; Ammigand et al., 2018; Misra et al., 2003). It explores how the combination of academic pressures and parenting responsibilities can challenge mental health. This study adds depth to the literature by highlighting specific contributors to FIGSMs' poor mental health, which universities can better respond to and help to alleviate.

Limitations

One of the areas I was particularly sensitive to while conducting this research was my own positionality as a FIGSM. To attempt to reveal my own unexamined assumptions about FIGSMs' experiences, I intentionally chose analytic methods (e.g., three rounds of coding) that would distance me from FIGSMs' experiences so that I could more clearly distinguish their perceptions from my own. In addition, I attempted to gain new perspectives through conducting member checks. The focus group format allowed participants to speak about difficult

experiences, such as experiencing racism. The group validation led participants who were quieter in their first interview to open up.

My data reflected the emphasis of FIGSMs on barriers and supports. FIGSMs did not speak very much about opportunities. For this reason, the results section is mainly focused on barriers and supports and much less on opportunities. Opportunities for FIGSMs might be a focus of future studies.

Member checks allowed me to address my concerns around internal validity. I conducted member checks with six of the original eight participants in the form of a focus group with four participants and two individual follow-up meetings. Finally, emerging themes I identified based on the initial interviews were both confirmed and problematized by participants who offered alternative explanations.

The contexts in which my study was conducted—universities and university communities with low numbers of immigrant compatriots—revealed similarities in the challenges faced by FIGSMs related to the lack of established enclaves or support networks. The absence of a robust co-ethnic community infrastructure exacerbates the isolation and stress experienced by these students, making it difficult for them to balance academic and parental responsibilities effectively. Without these enclaves, FIGSMs often lack accessible peer support, shared resources, and a collective voice to advocate for their unique needs within the university setting. This isolation can lead to heightened feelings of acculturative stress, limited access to informal mentorship, and a greater struggle in navigating both academic and social landscapes. It is possible that the social determinants of FIGSM health would be different in universities and communities with strong enclaves made up of immigrant compatriots.

Given these findings, a future study will focus on conducting a follow-up to explore the long-term impacts of these challenges and to assess the efficacy of any newly implemented support structures. This follow-up study will aim to identify whether the introduction of targeted interventions and support programs, such as peer-led support groups, childcare facilities, and cultural competency training for faculty, have made a tangible difference in the experiences of FIGSMs. It will also seek to understand how the development of formal and informal enclaves over time can influence the well-being, academic success, and overall integration of FIGSMs into the university community. By examining these aspects longitudinally, the follow-up study will provide deeper insights into the evolution of support systems and their effectiveness in addressing the unique challenges faced by FIGSMs.

Directions for Future Research

While significant strides have been made in understanding the unique challenges faced by female international graduate students who are mothers, there is continued need for comprehensive research to throw more light on their experiences and develop effective support strategies. Future research directions would aim to deepen our understanding of the multifaceted barriers FIGSMs face, assess the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms, and explore innovative solutions to improve their academic and personal lives, especially their mental health and well-being. Thus, future research should explore the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and other identity factors to understand the diverse experiences of FIGSMs. Further, future longitudinal studies could gain insights into how the challenges and needs of FIGSMs evolve over time, from admission to graduation and beyond. Future research could offer more insight into the mental health challenges specific to FIGSMs, including stress, anxiety, and depression, and the impact of these challenges on their academic performance and

overall well-being. Important research might evaluate the accessibility, affordability, and quality of childcare services provided by universities to assess their effectiveness in supporting FIGSMs. Policy research could focus on national and state-level policies that support FIGSMs, such as visa regulations, work permits for FIGSMs and their families, and financial aid. Future research could investigate the social integration of FIGSMs' children within the school system and community, and the impact on their development and well-being.

Conclusion

I hope that by illuminating problems of practice experienced by female international graduate students who are mothers and their families as well as identifying potential solutions at the university level will lead to more FIGSMs successfully pursuing higher degrees and being able to dedicate their knowledge, skills, and incredible gifts to their communities, workplaces, and societies. This study highlights the significant challenges faced by FIGSMs in balancing their academic and parental responsibilities. The research shows that FIGSMs often experience heightened stress and poor sociocultural health due to navigating a multitude of interrelated barriers, including limited social support, stringent visa regulations, and insufficient access to childcare and healthcare services. These challenges are compounded by cultural expectations and the pressures of adjusting to a new educational system, often leading to physical and emotional exhaustion. To address these issues, the study recommends a comprehensive support framework that includes flexible immigration policies, enhanced university services, and community-based initiatives. Universities should establish dedicated offices, such as the Office of Services for Student Parents (OSSP), to provide targeted support, including affordable childcare, mental health services, and academic accommodations. Furthermore, national immigration policies should be reformed to allow greater flexibility and stability for FIGSMs and their families. By

implementing these measures, universities and policymakers can create an inclusive environment that not only supports the academic success of FIGSMs but also promotes their overall well-being and integration into the academic community and society at large.

Appendix I

Qualitative Survey Questionnaire

1. At your graduate institution in the US, what are the most positive supports and opportunities related to immigration...
 - a. for international female graduate students with children?
 - b. for graduate students' children?
2. At your graduate institution, if you could change anything about the supports, opportunities, or barriers related to immigration, what would you change...
 - a. for international female graduate students with children?
 - b. for graduate students' children?
3. What, if any, have the impacts been on you or your children...
 - a. of immigration barriers?
 - b. of immigration supports?
4. At your graduate institution in the US, what are the most positive supports and opportunities related to your social experiences...
 - a. for international female graduate students with children?
 - b. for graduate students' children?
5. At your graduate institution, if you could change anything about the supports, opportunities, or barriers related to your social (e.g., support for you, for your family, belonging, exclusion, discrimination, acculturation) experiences, what would you change...
 - a. for International female graduate students with children?
 - b. for graduate students' children?

6. What, if any, have the impacts been on you or your children...
 - a. of social barriers?
 - b. of social supports?
 - c. of acculturation pressures? (e.g., pressure to be “American”)
7. At your graduate institution in the US, what are the most positive supports and opportunities related to your economic experiences for...
 - a. international female graduate students with children?
 - b. graduate students’ children?
8. At your graduate institution, if you could change anything about the supports, opportunities, or barriers related to your economic experiences, what would you change...
 - a. for international female graduate students with children?
 - b. for graduate students’ children?
9. What, if any, have the impacts been on you or your children...
 - a. of economic barriers?
 - b. of economic supports?
10. At your graduate institution in the US, what are the most positive supports and opportunities related to your academic experiences...
 - a. for international female graduate students with children?
 - b. for graduate students’ children?
11. At your graduate institution, if you could change anything about the supports, opportunities, or barriers related to your academic experiences, what would you change...
 - a. for international female graduate students with children?

- b. for graduate students' children?
12. What, if any, have the impacts been on you or your children...
- a. of academic barriers?
 - b. of academic supports?
13. Do your children live with you in the US? Y N (If yes, skip next 15)
14. Do you plan to bring your children to live with you in the US? Y N
15. Describe the impacts on you of your children living in your home country:

Sociodemographic

1. How old were you when you first came to the US?
2. How old were you when you started as a US graduate student?
3. For how many years have you been in graduate school?
4. How long is your program of study?
5. If a friend or colleague was looking for a graduate program, to what extent, if at all, would you recommend your department? Your school?
6. What are your plans after you complete your degree?
7. Do you have there is a Family GE at the Graduate school or a family office How have you engaged with these offices?
8. In what country were you born?
9. In what country (countries) were you raised?
 - a. _____ (ages: e.g., 1-5 yrs) b. _____ (ages: _____)
 - c. _____ (ages: _____) d. _____ (ages: _____)

10. Please indicate the primary language spoken in your childhood home: _____

11. Please indicate the primary language(s) you speak with your children: _____

a. Why do you speak this/these language(s) with your children? _____

12. In what year were you born? _____

13. Please select the highest level of education completed by your mother. If you are not sure, please take your best guess.

Never attended school

Some primary education

Completed primary education

Some secondary education

Graduated from secondary education or high school

Some vocational training

Graduated from vocational training

Some tertiary education

Graduated from tertiary education

Some graduate school

Graduated from graduate school

14. Please select the highest level of education completed by your father. If you are not sure, please take your best guess.

Never attended school

Some primary education

Completed primary education

Some secondary education

Graduated from secondary education or high school

Some vocational training

Graduated from vocational training

Some tertiary education

Graduated from tertiary education

Some graduate school

Graduated from graduate school

15. If you have older siblings, please select the highest level of education completed by your older siblings.

Never attended school

Some primary education

Completed primary education

Some secondary education

Graduated from secondary education or high school

Some vocational training

Graduated from vocational training

Some tertiary education

Graduated from tertiary education

Some graduate school

Graduated from graduate school

16. What is your relationship status?

1. Single

2. In Domestic partnership

3. Married
 4. Separated
 5. Divorced
 6. Widowed
17. If married, where does your partner live and why?
18. How many children do you have? ____
19. How many children (younger than 18) live in your home in the US? ____
20. Of your children under 18 years old, how many were born in the US? ____
21. Of your children under 18 years old, how many were born outside the US? ____
22. Of your children under 18 years old, how many are US citizens?

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