



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF INDIAN MOTHER STUDENTS IN ROLE BALANCING AND BOUNDARY INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on work/family border theory, this study aims to investigate the academic challenges experienced by mother students in India and their coping strategies for balancing academic and family roles. It will also explore how boundary integration and border keepers help Indian mother students balance these roles. A qualitative exploratory approach was adopted, and in-depth individual interviews were conducted with seven mother students in India as participants. The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed that time constraints, low technical competency and academic adjustment problems were the main hindrances faced by these students. The flexibility of online learning, family prioritization, benefits of higher education and support from husbands, family members, peers and teachers facilitated work/family balance. The findings indicate that boundary integration facilitates greater work/family balance than segmentation. A flexible curriculum would aid in balancing these roles.

INTRODUCTION

The decision to pursue higher education is one of the most significant commitments a student will make in their lifetime. The journey of every student is different. When a mother enrolls in university as a student, her experiences are likely to be very different from those of other students. Ngum (2011) suggested that women's academic journeys in higher education are more challenging than men's due to family formations and the social expectations of a good mother. As the number of mother students in higher education increases, it is important to highlight that it is not easy for them to handle both motherhood and academic responsibilities (Moghadam et al., 2017), especially in India. Previous research, most of which was conducted in Western countries, has suggested that women's advancement in higher education could result in changes in gender roles, low marriage rates and late marriages (Hewitt & Churchill, 2020; OECD Family Database, 2021), and a decrease in the role of women in household chores (Miranda, 2011). However, in India, despite the progression of women in other avenues such as career and further education (Gautam, 2015), traditional gender roles are still strong (Dutta, 2016; Kohli, 2017). For instance, women were found to spend twice as much time doing household chores as men (Joy, 2020). The average age of girls marrying in India is around 22 years old (Sheikh, 2019), and there is strong pressure for them to bear children quickly (Dixit et al., 2021).

Additionally, childcare is considered the primary responsibility of women in India (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2001), even if they are pursuing a personal goal like educational advancement. Therefore, compared to other cultures in which traditional gender roles are changing, it is particularly important for mother students in India to pursue role balance between their families and academic responsibilities. Although the number of mother students is increasing in higher education in India (Verma, 2021), a limited number of studies have focused on them.

Thus, the objectives of the current study are to investigate the academic challenges experienced by mother students and the decisions and behaviours that enable them to manage and negotiate the academic and family domains. Also, while adopting Clark's (2000) work/family border theory, we will explore how boundary integration and border keepers may help Indian mother students with work/family balance.

The following three research questions were posed:

- What are the main academic challenges experienced by Indian mother students?
- How do Indian mother students balance their roles in family and academic domains?

- How do boundary integration and border keepers help Indian mother students with role balancing in work/family domains?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges experienced by mother students in India: Over the past two decades, the gross enrolment rate of Indian women in higher education has increased significantly, from 6.7% in 2001–02 to 24.3% in 2014–15 (Anita & Ravindran, 2020; Lal & Arora, 2016). According to the All-India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) report, female student enrolment in Indian universities increased by 18.2% between 2015–16 and 2019–20 (Verma, 2021). However, despite their growing participation in different avenues, stereotypical ideas about division of labour still exist (Dutta, 2016), in which women are considered more responsible for housework and childcare (Bansal, 2012; Dutta, 2016; Kohli, 2017). Thus, the role expectations of women have increased (Bansal, 2012) because they now have to combine the role of motherhood with study without compromising the activities of either (Bansal, 2012; Dutta, 2016; Kohli, 2017; Moghadam et al., 2017).

It is never easy for mother students to deal with multiple responsibilities, as it requires harsh demands on one's body and mind (Springer et al., 2009), which could be even harder in India. Due to the overburdened responsibility, mother students experience several physical and psychological pressures and various other obstacles while pursuing their career-advancing pursuits (Pattayak & Pal, 2018). Thomas et al. (2020) noted that the experiences of student parents may vary from person to person depending upon individual circumstances, as well factors like level of study, mode of study and other commitments, including the need for part-time employment. A number of studies have been conducted in different countries that demonstrate the challenges faced by mother students (Berg & Mamhute, 2013; Inanir et al., 2015; Moghadam, 2015). In a qualitative study conducted by Moghadam et al. (2015), it was found that inflexible educational systems, such as inflexible rules, inappropriate curricula and limited collaboration of instructors and classmates, were some of the obstacles faced by mother students. Dankyiet al. (2019) illustrated that for new mother students, the absence of facilities, such as lactation rooms and convenient places for babysitters in universities, brings additional burdens. While pursuing higher education, due to dual responsibilities, mother students also experience mental strain such as low esteem, mental stress, poor concentration (Inanir et al., 2015; Taukeni, 2015; Thabette et al., 2020) and psychological issues like anger, loneliness, drowsiness and restlessness (Taukeni, 2015). While the literature has highlighted challenges experienced by mother students in different countries, the present study explores their challenges in India, where women are supposed to integrate family and work life without compromising personal responsibilities.

Boundary integration and segmentation: To understand how mother students in India balance their roles and to identify the obstacles and supports for achieving role balance, the present study used the work/family border theory, propounded by Clark (2000), who claimed that work and family are two different domains because their responsibilities are carried out in different places and times and fulfil different purposes, such as a sense of accomplishment in work life and personal

happiness on the personal front. The demarcation between family and work domains is called a "border" and is where the individual makes a daily transition as a border crosser, either as a central participant or peripheral participant. Clark (2000) described three types of borders: physical, temporal and psychological. A workplace far away from home is said to represent a physical border between work and home, a temporal border means set work hours and a psychological border is self-created rules used to differentiate work and family, implying that rules appropriate for one domain may not apply to another.

The theory further emphasizes that despite facing constraints, work/family balance is attainable due to the proactive nature of border crossers with the help of border keepers or the people around them (Clark, 2000). Unlike peripheral participants, central participants identify more with domain responsibilities and are connected with other central members of domains, which allows for greater work/family balance. Clark (2000) defined balance as satisfaction and good functioning in both domains with minimum role conflicts. The theory proposes that border strength depends on three factors: boundary permeability, flexibility and blending (Clark, 2000). Boundary permeability means that one domain can enter another domain. Permeation can be psychological, where one domain either negatively or positively impacts an individual. Flexibility signifies the capacity of boundaries to contract or expand either temporarily or physically (Thomas et al., 2021); for instance, if a person may work from any location, then the physical border is considered more flexible. Blending refers to the disappearance of the presumed boundary from one domain or another, such as the blending of work and personal life domains or spheres (Clark, 2000). When the domains are different, a stronger border, characterized as impermeable, inflexible and rigid, allows for more work/life balance. In contrast, when the domains are similar, a weaker border allows for more work/family balance. When borders are regarded as inflexible and impermeable and do not allow one domain to enter the other, there could be boundary segmentation or independence of domains (Wepfer et al., 2018). Boundary integration, on the other hand, occurs when boundaries are flexible and permeable, allowing one domain to enter another. In the current study, work/family border theory is adopted to explicate the challenges and role balancing of mother students and to explore whether boundary integration or segmentation aids mother students in work/family balance.

Coping strategies of mother students: Managing the roles of parenting with studying requires a combined effort from an individual mother and people around them, such as partners, siblings, parents, in-laws and teachers (Kisanga & Matiba, 2021). At the individual level, previous studies have suggested that despite facing so many barriers, these challenges act like facilitators for these students. For instance, Swain and Hammond (2011) indicated that several challenges act as motivators for mother students and boost their drive and commitment to their studies. Haleman (2004) highlighted that mother students considered education to be a transformative experience that helped them to change and strengthened their identity and self-esteem, resulting in personal empowerment. As emphasized by work/family border theory, border keepers, such as spouses at home and supervisors at the organization, play a significant role in supporting border crossers' abilities to manage work/home domains (Clark, 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009; Park et al., 2020).

Numerous studies have focused on the important mediating role of border keepers in balancing roles. Using thematic analysis, Kisanga and Matiba (2021) conducted a study on the coping mechanisms used by mother students while pursuing higher education studies in Tanzania and found that mother students used two types of coping strategies: problem-focused coping, including hiring part-time babysitters and getting help from partners, relatives and peers; and emotion-focused coping, which involves temporary stress management. The literature suggests that support can help mother students cope with their multiple responsibilities, reduce emotional strain and foster greater work/family balance, including emotional encouragement and contributions to household chores and childcare from husbands and family members, and assistance from teachers and classmates (Dickson & Tennant, 2021; Kisanga & Matiba, 2021; Moghadam et al., 2019; Taukeni, 2014). Dankyi et al. (2019) noted that to manage their multiple roles, mother students hired domestic helpers, kept children at daycares centres, took loans and asked for help from husbands and friends. In the Indian context, research has emphasized that help and support from husbands and family members aid women in border management (Bansal, 2012; Dutta, 2016; Kohli, 2017; Sharma & Dhir, 2022). Receiving financial help from a partner helps mother students navigate their parenting responsibilities with studying, and mother students who need to work to financially support themselves and their children face additional challenges (Kisanga & Matiba, 2021). While most prior research focuses on investigating mother students' challenges and coping strategies, this study adopts Clark's (2000) work/family border theory to investigate academic challenges faced by mother students and the decisions and behaviours that enable them to manage and negotiate academic and family domains. It also explores whether boundary integration or segmentation aids mother students in work/family balance.

METHODS

Participants: Through purposive sampling methods, seven mother students from India were recruited as participants. This sampling method consists of finding and selecting individuals who are familiar with, or have experienced, a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Of seven participants, four lived in joint families and three were part of nuclear families. All participants were from financially stable families and lived in semi-urban and urban regions of India. The inclusion criteria were mother students who had begun their higher education academic journey after a 5–12-year discontinuance from it. All participants had experienced both online and offline classes, which were adopted after COVID-19. The ages of the participants' children ranged from three months to eight years.

Data collection and data analysis: A qualitative exploratory design was used in this research because this approach emphasizes obtaining meaning from the experiences and views of participants (Merriam, 2009). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted online. All interviews were conducted after obtaining consent from the participants. The participants were furnished with accurate and complete information on the goals and procedures of the investigation. All participants were aware that their participation was voluntary. To maintain participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used in this paper. The demographic profiles of the participant's are provided in Table 1. All interviews were

conducted in Hindi and the transcriptions of the interviews were translated by the researchers. The interview transcriptions were analyzed following the thematic analysis method; that is, starting with immersive reading, followed by open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The transcriptions were then revisited to confirm the themes and subthemes.

Table 1. Profile of participants

Participants	Academic return (after)	Course	Age	Family structure
Sona	10 years	M.Sc.	34	Nuclear family
Sujita	10 years	M.Ed.	36	Nuclear family
Kriti	7 years	Certificate course	33	Nuclear family
Rani	6 years	B.Ed.	27	Joint family
Alka	5 years	Ph.D.	37	Joint family
Puja	9 years	M.A.	35	Joint family
Priya	12 years	B. Ed.	39	Joint family

Note: MSc: Master of Science, M.Ed.: Master of Education, B.Ed.: Bachelor of Education, M.A.: Master of Arts, and Ph.D.: Doctor of Philosophy

RESULTS

The results of the analysis revealed three main themes: academic challenges, balancing the roles of border crossers, and the assistance of border keepers, as shown in Table 2. Under the first theme, three subthemes focus on the challenges experienced by the mother students. The second theme relates to coping strategies, which includes three subthemes. The third theme, which consists of two subthemes, concerns the assistance of border keepers. In subsequent sections, we connect our findings with work/border theory.

Academic challenges: This study suggests that time constraints, limited technical competence and academic adjustment problems are challenges experienced by mother students. We found that academic discontinuance intensified the challenges of the participating students.

Time constraints: Most participants indicated that they were facing problems because they had restarted their studies after discontinuance. They were cut off from study and had almost forgotten ten what they had learned during their previous college time. For them, it was difficult to absorb the course content as quickly as their classmates. For example, Sujita, who was pursuing her master's degree 10 years after graduating from her undergraduate, remarked, "I was nervous in the beginning because I have been totally cut-off from the academic field for the last few years and almost forgot what I had learned in my undergraduate programme."

All participants explained that they knew they needed to give extra attention and time to their studies, but arranging that extra time was challenging because they also had motherhood responsibilities. Kriti, who lived with her husband and 5-year-old son, shared that she had wanted to enrol in a doctoral degree but did not pursue it after her marriage. She commented, "I wanted to do a Ph.D. in information technology. But for this, I must pass the entrance examination, which is now quite difficult because I have forgotten what I learned at that time". Sona, who left her studies for 10 years after her undergraduate degree and was, now, enrolled in a master's programme, said, "In the first semester, I had four subjects.

Table 2. Themes and subthemes developed from data analysis

Challenges faced	Balancing the role of border crossers	Assistance of border keepers
<p>Time constraints</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't arrange extra time for study • Getting low marks in examinations • Can't pursue a course as per interest • Delaying academic work <p>Low technical competency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average technical knowledge • Difficulties using learning apps • Problems making PowerPoints in a proper way <p>Academic adjustment problem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low learning proficiency • Difficulties adjusting to the classroom 	<p>Flexibility of online learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time flexibility • Location flexibility • Looking after infant while attending class <p>Prioritization of family duties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hired domestic helper • Late submission of assignments • Missed midterm paper • Skipped lectures <p>Benefits of higher education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced confidence • Improved self-concept • Increased networking • Improved decision-making ability 	<p>Family structure and support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive husband • Help from family members in a joint family • Looking after children in absence of the mother • Emotional encouragement • Sharing of household chores <p>Academic flexibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive classroom atmosphere • Helpful teachers & peers • Getting permission to leave college a little early • Permission to bring infants to a midterm exam

Sometimes I did not get enough time to complete the assignments of all subjects". Other participants also expressed similar views. Interviews indicated that due to personal responsibilities, the participants could not get enough time to complete their academic work at a scheduled time and asked for extra time for assignment submissions.

Limited technical competence: Lack of technical proficiency related to the usage of computers and the internet was a constraint for some participants. Priya's husband was a lawyer and they had three children. She had been away from academic life for the past 12 years and said that she was not technically skilled. She considered other students younger than her to be better at using technology, which was required in many courses. She explained, "When I did my graduation 12 years back, there was not much use of computers or any technology by the students in my class, but now the use of computers is very common. My classmates are good at using it, but I find it difficult". Likewise, Sona, Sujita, Rani and Puja also noted that they faced problems using technology. Sona explained, "Initially, whenever I had classroom presentations, I found it difficult to organize and structure my PowerPoint presentation". Sujita stated, "My classmates were aware of different learning apps, but this was new for me". Although interview responses highlighted that online classes were beneficial for participants on a personal front, in the academic domain, they found it problematic to adjust to an online set-up due to low technical know-how. According to the participants, this seemed easy for their classmates.

Academic adjustment problems: The interview responses highlight that these participants faced adjustment issues in their college after restarting their academic life. Participants said that they were older than their other classmates and due to this age gap, they sometimes felt different. Sujita said, "I was 23 when I completed my undergraduate programme, now I am 33 and pursuing my post-graduate". She went on to share her experience on the first day of class:

When I entered the classroom to attend my first class after the long academic gap, other students thought that I was their new teacher. All students stood up when I entered the classroom. I felt embarrassed at that time. They all were below 25 years of age perhaps, and I was the only one who was above 30. During the interviews, it did not seem that the participants experienced any discriminatory reactions from their peers due to their age. Sujita noted that her

classmates complimented her by saying that she looked very young, and it did not seem that she had two daughters. However, the participants appeared to consider themselves different from others. They also stated that compared to their classmates, they were initially slow to understand course content and hesitated to respond if any questions were raised by a teacher. It was also evident from the interviews that the kind of course taken by participants impacted their classroom adjustment. For instance, Priya said, "I was 39 when I enrolled in the B.Ed. And in my class, there were mainly female students, and a few of them were my age and were married and had kids, just like me. So, I didn't feel I was different from other students". Other participants who were pursuing a B.Ed. commented that there were married and mother students in their class, so they did not feel they were the only ones who were different. These statements imply that enrolling in a course with similar kinds of students creates more flexibility to adjust to the classroom environment.

Balancing the role of border crossers: The results reveal that despite facing hindrances due to the inflexibility of the temporal border, such as rigid class schedules, the Indian mother students endeavoured to balance roles between the two domains of mother and student. This is due to the flexibility of physical borders that participants were granted with online classes and the psychological border where they prioritized family duties to help balance the roles.

Flexibility of online learning: Participants remarked that it was tough to pursue higher education after discontinuance from study because it not only created obstacles to understanding course content easily on the academic front but also created adjustment problems for infants who always saw their mothers at home. Participants commented that when they decided to pursue education, they first created strategies to set infant routines. For example, Rani, who gave birth to a baby while pursuing her B.Ed., told us, "My son is three months old and sleeps a lot, which helps me to complete my work. I also set his routine, like when to massage him. Usually, he sleeps after getting a massage and I have time for study". Similar to Thabette et al. (2020), the current study illustrated that despite opting for several coping strategies, participants found it difficult to manage their different duties. For example, Sujita said the following:

I sent my daughter to a daycares centre, which was 20–25 minutes away from my residence, but she did not adjust there. She cried a lot while going to the daycares centre. So, I decided not to send her to the anymore. At that time, I felt helpless, so my first semester journey was very difficult. But she adjusted after the adoption of online classes during COVID-19 because I was present with her at home. Online classes helped me manage both duties. The narratives indicate that the adoption of online classes during COVID-19 helped the participants because they could look after their children and feel secure that their children were safe and with them. Alka, who was pursuing a Ph.D. in computer science, said that “online classes are beneficial for me because before online classes, I went home, which is near my department, at lunch time to see my child”. Attending classes from home in an online set-up enabled participants to bend both their responsibilities efficiently, and these intersections among motherhood duties, academic responsibilities and online learning (technology) allowed boundary integration, which proved beneficial for participants.

Prioritization of family duties: Participants considered both roles important. To reduce household responsibilities, most participants hired a domestic helper for mopping and cleaning the house. They cooked themselves, but they did not consider this to be particularly problematic. They found class timing challenging. For instance, Kriti said that her class time was from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm and her son’s school time was from 8:30 am to 12:30 pm, so she left her class to pick her son up from school. All participants had classes from Monday to Friday and attended for more than five hours. Two participants even had classes on Saturday. All interviewees acknowledged that whenever both responsibilities collided, they focused more on their motherhood responsibilities. Sujita pointed out: “I did not give my one-subject midterm paper exam because my younger daughter was sick”. It is reflected in the participants’ responses that these students skipped their classes and delayed assignment submissions to fulfil motherhood commitments. Prioritization of family duties over the academic domain helped participants with their work/family balance but impacted their academic lives when they eliminated academic responsibilities to navigate both roles.

Benefits of higher education: All participants considered education important and demonstrated that returning to higher education increased their self-confidence, improved their value among family and friends, and expanded their social networks. Most emphasized that quitting education would impact their confidence and decision-making abilities. Sujita said, “Before taking admission, I had started thinking that I was worthless and my whole life just revolved around the four walls of the house, but now I feel good about myself and my ability to make decisions is better than before”. Likewise, Sona shared, “I felt that my life was stopped and became monotonous after quitting my study, but after returning to university, I am feeling happy and confident”. Priya noted that “since returning to academic life, I feel that I am also something now”. This statement implies that pursuing higher education creates a feeling of equality. All the participants illustrated that returning to higher education after a long period of time provided them with opportunities to make new friends and create a social circle. Their social activities also increased through participation in college events, such as seminars and conferences.

This participation helped their personality development, including interpersonal skills, which had been impacted by their long absence from academic life. Puja, who had been engaged in raising her twin infants for the past five years and was now enrolled in a master’s degree, stated that “interacting with new people and making new friends helps me improve my interpersonal skills”. Similar views were expressed by other participants. All the participants agreed that these benefits played a meaningful role in their lives, because despite facing challenges, they felt motivated to manage them and it made them feel strong to continue in both domains. When we asked participants about the benefits of their personal-to-academic lives, Kriti said that “motherhood duties require lots of patience, so when I returned to higher education, although experiencing academic problems, I never lost my patience and continued to focus on both duties”. This result is in line with Clark’s (2000) theory that permeation can be psychological and that one domain can positively impact another.

Assistance of border keepers: The use of boundary integration, such as sharing one domain problem with another domain member, aids in work/family balance. Unlike the work/family border theory, we observed that border keepers’ support for border crossers did not always depend on their level of awareness about the other domain. For instance, most participants’ parents-in-law were unfamiliar with the academic field but still supported them. Family structure (joint/nuclear family) played a significant role in border management.

Family members and family structure: Heavy work schedules constrained the husband from helping participants daily in household chores, but whenever needed, the husband shared household responsibilities, which enabled the participants to manage both domains. For instance, the husband shared some household chores during the participants’ examinations. Sujita remarked, “I did not score a good percentage in my first semester; I was very disturbed and sad at that time. But my husband encouraged and motivated me”. This narrative indicates that emotional encouragement helps in balancing roles. The present study found that living in a joint family was more advantageous for participating mother students. Alka described, “I return from college at 4 pm and my son comes home from school at 2 pm. My mother-in-law takes care of him, which is a big help for me and gives me satisfaction that he is safe at home”. Family is considered extremely valuable and a strong coping mechanism in India (Sonawat, 2001). Dutta (2016) suggested that a nuclear family is better for married women pursuing higher education. He found that these women enjoyed more autonomy to make choices and more support from their husbands, while in a joint family, the burden of child-rearing and household management scaled up and the husband became less supportive of their wives’ careers. However, the results of the present study showed that joint families helped more with work/family balance.

Academic support: When responding to a question regarding the support and facilities provided by the university to help them manage their different responsibilities, the majority of participants indicated that they were not aware of whether facilities like daycares centres existed on the university campus. However, they received support from their teachers and other university staff. Rani remarked, “My college time was 9:00 to 4:00, but for some days, I got permission from my college authority to return home after 1:00 because my son is three months old. I need to feed him”.

Kriti also got permission to leave college one hour early to pick up her son. She added that:

My son had holiday on the day I had my midterm exam and my husband had work. Initially, I thought I could not sit the exam, but when I asked my college authority if I could bring my son with me as there was no other person in the home to look after him, I got permission to bring my son with me. The results suggest that whenever needed, participants asked for help and most of the time, their teachers were supportive and showed sensitivity towards their situation. The participants' narratives showed that the classroom environment was amicable and encouraging. Kriti said, "My classmates are very supportive". Other participants also shared similar views. According to Sujita, her classmates encouraged her during group tasks. When required, their peers helped them; for instance, if the participants were absent, their classmates sent them notes and informed them what had happened in the class. With the support of teachers and peers, mother student's journeys become a little more comfortable and their academic pressure is reduced.

DISCUSSION

The study found that participating mother students faced challenges, but their coping strategies at the individual level and support from others helped them navigate their work/family balance. Responses from participants reflected that due to discontinuance from study and time limitations, they found it difficult to pursue a course according to interest and instead chose courses that they could handle and that helped them manage both domains. The literature indicates that mother student's find it difficult to find enough time for motherhood duties and studying (Firmin & Pathammavong, 2012; Ravindranath et al., 2021; Taukeni, 2014). At universities in India, the curriculum and schedule are normally rigid and planned by the school, leaving little space for students to adjust or select courses according to their situations and needs. With reference to Clark's (2000) theory, we found that domains were different before the adoption of online classes because they were carried out at two different times and places but became similar after the adoption of online classes when the duties of both domains can be carried out simultaneously. We also found that border strength was unrelated to work/family integration because whether the domains were different or similar, it was a weak border that allowed flexibility, permeability and bending and permitted a higher level of work/life integration for participating mother students. Lack of technical proficiency related to the usage of computers and the internet was a constraint for some participants. Now that higher education is becoming digitalized (Dhawan, 2020; Thomas et al., 2021), research suggests that younger students are more comfortable using technology than mature students (Staddon, 2020). Participants said that they could not find sufficient time to understand and learn about the use of technology for academic purposes. This is in accordance with the findings of Thomas et al. (2021) regarding the influence of technology on mother students' work/family interface. Due to discontinuance from study, the participants found it challenging to adjust to an academic environment. Osam et al. (2017) suggested that adult learners who have been away from the academic environment for longer periods may feel out of place.

As all the participants were from financially stable families, they did not mention financial issues such as paying college fees or needing a part-time job to support themselves and their families as an obstacle. Kisanga and Matiba (2021) indicated that mother students' challenges were greater when they needed to financially support themselves and their children. Some prior studies have also found that students consider online classes more convenient and flexible (Muthuprasad et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2021). With respect to Clark's (2000) work/family border theory, the present study found that online classes provided more flexibility and increased the permeations and bending of roles for participants, which helped them with their work/family integration. The results further showed that boundary integration, which allowed greater work/family balance for participants, depended upon both the mother students' own efforts and strategies, such as setting children's routine and prioritizing family duties, and situational factors, such as the adoption of online classes during COVID-19, which increased the intersection between the two domains and proved favourable for these students by providing location and time flexibility.

In line with prior studies showing that women in India prioritized family overwork (Pattnayak & Pal, 2018; Sharma & Dhir, 2022), the findings of the present study showed that in balancing both domains, participants prioritized their family over academic responsibilities, which impacted their studies. Wilson (1997) used the term "role elimination" to describe the mother students' coping strategy of choosing family commitments over career-advancing opportunities. We found that integrating boundary management preferences served as a double-edged sword in that it strengthened the positive influence of academic life on personal life but impacted the students' academic responsibilities. All the participants felt that returning to academic life provided them with benefits, such as increased self-confidence, networking and improved position within the family.

Due to these benefits, their determination to continue in both domains was high despite facing challenges. (Mottarella et al., 2008; Saxena & Bhatnagar, 2018) found that education enhances women's self-identity. Similarly, Swain and Hammond (2011) indicated that the challenges faced by mother students act as motivators and boost their drive and commitment to studies. Responses in this study revealed that returning to higher education created a positive self-concept among participants, reinforced their decisiveness and mitigated their negative ways of looking at themselves. Dutta (2016) conducted a study in India and noted that pursuing higher education after marriage enhanced women's self-confidence and decision-making abilities. In line with Pattnayak and Pal (2018), the present study highlighted that participants from joint families had more advantages than those in nuclear families because this arrangement reduced the burden of household chores and child-rearing, and participant's had more time for study. They also felt satisfied that their children were safe at home in their absence. Pattnayak and Pal (2018) found that having grandparents and non-working members at home provided essential support such as childcare when mothers were not at home, enabling them to manage their dual duties competently. As per previous research, the psychological well-being of mother students is as important as physical health, and getting support and guidance from others reduces their mental strain (Berg & Mamhute, 2016).

The findings of the present study illustrated that support from teachers and peers not only helped participants balance their roles but also facilitated psychological adjustment in the classroom. In summary, contrary to Clark's (2000) definition of balance, the present study indicated that the participating mother students still struggled to function well in both domains with minimum role conflict. However, they considered that they had achieved balance because they were satisfied with their work/family integration.

CONCLUSION

Implication and Limitations

In the present study, we presented qualitative data from seven in-depth interviews with Indian mother students and framed our results around the challenges and role balancing of mother students. This study used Clark's (2000) work/family border theory to investigate academic challenges and the role balancing of mother students in undertaking their educational pursuits. This theory suggests that despite facing constraints, being proactive helps individuals negotiate between two worlds. The findings of this study revealed that participants blurred their home and academic roles, which impacted their academic performance. The responses revealed that their experiences in higher education were different from those of other students in their departments. For instance, they faced difficulties using technology for study purposes, which appeared to be relatively easy for their classmates. In terms of strategies undertaken for balancing the roles of the mother students in this study, similar to prior research (Dankyi et al., 2019; Dutta, 2016), it was found that both the individual efforts of participants and assistance from other people facilitated the balancing of academic and family roles.

Supporting Clark's (2000) work/border theory, the present study found that being central participants in both domains allowed for greater work/family balance. At the individual level, the flexibility of online learning, prioritization of duties and benefits of higher education helped the participants balance their roles. The results revealed that despite adopting strategies such as setting children's routines and hiring domestic helpers and babysitters, some participants found it difficult to manage their roles. However, the adoption of online learning in higher education after COVID-19 proved beneficial for participants in harmonizing their dual responsibilities. Our findings suggest that mother students need physical and temporal flexibility to balance their responsibilities. In line with prior research, the present study reaffirms the important role played by border keepers, such as spouses, family members, peers and teachers, whose assistance helps these students balance their roles (Clark, 2000; Dutta, 2016; Kohli, 2017; Bansal; Taukeni, 2014; Sicam et al., 2021). The results of this study suggest that emotional and psychological support from proximate members enables mother students to make tough decisions about pursuing higher education alongside motherhood duties, as well as helping them navigate their roles efficiently. In contrast with some prior studies that suggest that women living in joint families are put under additional pressure of family responsibilities (Barhate et al., 2021; Dutta, 2016), our data suggest that joint families aid in border management. Contrary to Clark's (2000) work/family border theory, which observed that border keepers' support for border crossers depends on their level of awareness about the other

domain, in this study, we found that most participant's parents-in-law were not familiar with the academic field but still supported them. Similar to Kisanga and Matiba (2021), this study suggests that participants prefer problem-focused coping strategies over emotional-focused coping. Although the results showed there was a lack of facilities, such as a daycares centre within the university campus, academic flexibility and support from teachers and peers, such as extra time to submit assignments and a cooperative classroom atmosphere, made participants' border transitions manageable. Interview responses indicated that these students were not aware of government guidelines and policies that focused on women's inclusion in higher education. For example, the majority of participants were not aware of the University Grant Commission (2011) guidelines that direct Indian universities to set up daycares centres on campus.

The findings show that a boundary integration strategy can facilitate work/family balance because when domains are merged, it becomes possible for students to continue in both domains. This study found that permeability, bending and flexibility, particularly flexibility in physical and temporal borders, allowed greater work/family balance. Therefore, this study suggests that the adoption of curriculum flexibility can help mother students with border management. As an implication for educational institutions, a fully flexible credits-based system, as practiced by one Indian university (Zafar et al., 2014), seems suitable for mother students' work/family integration because it provides flexibility in terms of selecting, scheduling and planning study. India's National Education Policy of 2020 also emphasizes flexible curriculum and support for diverse student cohorts.

Additionally, there should be a course designed by learning institutions that aims to make female students aware of facilities that universities must provide under government policies and guidelines. Overall, these suggestions could make mother students more proactive and contribute to the achievement of sustainable development (SDG) 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). We recognize the limitations of this study, particularly the small number of participants, due to which the results may not be generalizable to the large population of mother students. However, the findings can create awareness and provide information on the challenges and role balancing of Indian mother students and suggest ways to help these students achieve work/family balance. As these students considered the flexibility of online learning to be helpful for them, and the University Grant Commission recently announced that degrees and diplomas from distance and online education modes will be considered equivalent to conventional learning (Yadav, 2022), future research may take a quantitative approach to understanding the attitudes of Indian mother students regarding higher education delivered via distance or online learning.

Author Contributions

Jha, R.: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation, reviewing, and editing. Wei, J.-H.: Conceptualization, result interpretation, writing—reviewing and editing. Lin, H.-M.: Writing—reviewing.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from participants.

Declaration of interest: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare

Ethical Approval: Declaration of Helsinki places a particular emphasis on the medical research involving the participation of human beings as research. The present study did not fall within the purview of medical research, nor did it entail the use of experimental methods on human subjects. Rather, the study utilizes a survey-based approach and interviews, in which participants' anonymity is preserved. For ethical considerations, participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided with the option to decline or withdraw from the participation at any stage of the study. Consent was obtained from the participants prior to conducting the interviews.

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