

Balancing Dreams and Duties:
A Qualitative Exploration of Opportunities and Challenges for Mothers
Returning to Education in Malta

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
Masters in Gender, Society and Culture

Elvira Zerafa
Department of Gender and Sexualities
University of Malta
June 2025



University of Malta Library – Electronic Thesis & Dissertations (ETD) Repository

The copyright of this thesis/dissertation belongs to the author. The author's rights in respect of this work are as defined by the Copyright Act (Chapter 415) of the Laws of Malta or as modified by any successive legislation.

Users may access this full-text thesis/dissertation and can make use of the information contained in accordance with the Copyright Act provided that the author must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the prior permission of the copyright holder.



FACULTY/INSTITUTE/CENTRE/SCHOOL _____
DECLARATIONS BY POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Authenticity of Dissertation

I hereby declare that I am the legitimate author of this Dissertation and that it is my original work.

No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or institution of higher education.

I hold the University of Malta harmless against any third-party claims with regard to copyright violation, breach of confidentiality, defamation and any other third-party right infringement.

(b) Research Code of Practice and Ethics Review Procedures

I declare that I have abided by the University's Research Ethics Review Procedures.
Research Ethics & Data Protection form code

_____.

As a Master's student, as per Regulation 77 of the General Regulations for University Postgraduate Awards 2021, I accept that should my dissertation be awarded a Grade A, it will be made publicly available on the University of Malta Institutional Repository.

ABSTRACT

This thesis, "Balancing Dreams and Duties: A Qualitative Exploration of Opportunities and Challenges for Mothers Returning to Education in Malta," explores the complex and often conflicting realities faced by Maltese mothers who re-enter formal education while simultaneously fulfilling caregiving roles. Framed within a social constructionist ontology and grounded in feminist epistemology, the study adopts a phenomenological qualitative approach to examine how gendered social expectations, institutional frameworks, and personal ambitions shape these women's educational journeys.

The research involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine mothers who were either currently enrolled in or had recently completed formal education. They were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure the richness and relevance of their experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, were strictly upheld, ensuring participant autonomy and integrity throughout the research process.

Findings illuminate a dual narrative. On one hand, education emerges as a transformative tool, opening pathways to self-fulfilment, identity reconstruction, and socio-economic mobility. Participants described their return to education as a reclamation of personal agency after years of prioritizing others. On the other hand, they reported numerous structural and emotional barriers: acute time poverty, financial insecurity, inadequate childcare options, and inflexible academic systems that are slow to accommodate the needs of caregiving students. These tensions were often intensified by internalized societal pressures to embody the "ideal mother" while striving for academic achievement.

Despite these challenges, the study also highlights strong sources of resilience. Many participants relied on supportive partners, extended family, peer networks, and empathetic educators. Intrinsic motivation—rooted in a desire for self-improvement, role modelling for their children, and long-term career goals—played a central role in sustaining their efforts. Importantly, the presence of adaptive institutional practices, such as hybrid learning options or understanding lecturers, significantly enhanced women’s ability to persist and succeed.

The themes emerging from the data underscore a broader systemic disconnect between educational structures and the realities faced by caregiving students. The research emphasizes that while these mothers navigate an uphill battle, their stories are not solely defined by struggle; they also reflect strength, agency, and a redefinition of motherhood through the lens of education.

Based on these insights, the thesis presents a set of practical, context-specific recommendations. These include expanding access to affordable childcare, implementing flexible learning pathways, offering targeted financial assistance, and fostering inclusive academic cultures that recognize caregiving as a legitimate and valuable perspective within educational spaces.

This study contributes to feminist research by highlighting the voices of a demographic often overlooked in educational discourse. It also offers actionable insights for policymakers, academic institutions, and support services aiming for more equitable access to lifelong learning for mothers in Malta and similar contexts.

Keywords:

Motherhood; Maternal Identity; Maternal Education; Adult Learning; Educational Re-entry; Gender and Education; Emotional Labor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis represents the fulfilment of an academic goal and a personal journey marked by persistence, reflection, and transformation. Reaching this point would not have been possible without the unwavering support and encouragement of many people, to whom I owe my deepest gratitude.

First and foremost, I am profoundly grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Andreana Dibben, for her guidance, patience, and constructive feedback throughout this research process. Her academic insight, critical thinking, and thoughtful mentorship have not only improved the quality of this thesis but have also helped shape me into a more confident and reflective researcher. I am truly fortunate to have worked under her supervision.

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff at the Gender and Sexualities Department, whose support fostered a productive and intellectually stimulating environment. Special thanks go to Dr. Josann Cutajar and Dr. Marceline Naudi for their encouragement, assistance, and the many thought-provoking conversations that enriched my understanding and perspective.

This research would not have been possible without the contributions of the individuals who generously participated in this study. I am sincerely thankful to the mothers who shared their personal stories, challenges, and insights. Your voices are the heart of this work, and I am honoured to have had the opportunity to learn from your experiences.

On a more personal level, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my family. Thank you for your unconditional love, faith in my abilities, and for always encouraging me to follow my path.

To my children, thank you for being my greatest inspiration. This work is, in many ways, for you — a testament to the importance of education, resilience, and following one's passion despite the many roles we juggle in life.

Finally, I extend heartfelt appreciation to all the women and mothers—past, present, and future—who continue to challenge norms, pursue education, and advocate for change. Your strength and determination inspire everything this thesis represents.

Table of Contents

Authenticity of Dissertation	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Locating the Maternal: Gender, Power, and Tradition in Malta	2
Motherhood, Culture, and Educational Access in Malta	3
Aims and Rationale for the Study	5
Intersections of Self and Study: Reflecting on Positionality	7
Overview of Chapters	8
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Introduction	10
Maternal Education as a Catalyst for Societal Development	12
Emotional and Cognitive Determinants of Educational Engagement Among Mothers	13
Navigating the Return: Challenges Encountered by Mothers in Pursuing Education	16
Motherhood and Society: Examining the Cultural Narratives That Shape Maternal Identity	17
Motherhood Through an Intersectional Lens: Exploring Diverse Maternal Realities	19
Mothering in Malta: Identity, Expectations and Social Realities	21
The Gendered Economy of Care: Unpaid Domestic Labour, the Third shift and emotional labour	23
Why is the Topic of Mothers and Education So Little Researched?	25
Systemic Biases in Research	25
Methodological Challenges	25
Lack of Policy Focus and Funding	25
Implications of the Research Gap	26
Conclusion	26
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY	27
Philosophical foundations: Epistemology and Ontology	27
Research Design	29
Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment	30

Method of Data Collection	32
Data analysis	33
Limitations and strengths of the study	35
Limitations.....	35
Strengths.....	36
Ethical Considerations.....	36
Chapter 4: FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.....	39
Findings and Analysis.....	39
Motivations for Returning to Education	40
Challenges and Guilt - the Cost of “Having It All”	43
Support Systems.....	46
Institutional Support	49
Impact on Family and Children	51
Personal Growth and Empowerment.....	53
Discussion — Motherhood and Education Through a Feminist Lens	55
Conclusion	56
Chapter 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	57
Conclusion	57
Contributions of the study	58
Limitations of the Study.....	59
Recommendations and Reflections	59
Expand Access to Affordable and On-Campus Childcare.....	59
Implement Flexible Academic Policies	60
Train Academic Staff in Inclusive Practices	60
Establish Peer Mentoring and Support Networks	61
Provide Targeted Financial Assistance	61
Recognise Care Work in Institutional Planning	62
The Role of Policy and Advocacy.....	63
Cultural Change and the Future of Higher Education.....	63
Future Research	64
Final Thoughts	66
References	67
APPENDIX 1: Table with themes.....	92

APPENDIX 2: UREC Approval	94
APPENDIX 3: Facebook post.....	95
APPENDIX 4: Information letter	96
APPENDIX 5: Interview questions.....	99
APPENDIX 6: Participant Consent Form	101

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies, education is increasingly recognised as a lifelong pursuit. For many women, particularly mothers, returning to education after childbirth or extended periods of caregiving represents a significant personal and professional milestone. While educational attainment can offer pathways to improved employment prospects, financial independence, and personal fulfilment, it also presents unique challenges for mothers, who often juggle the dual roles of student and caregiver.

In Malta, the traditional family structure, cultural expectations, and gender norms can heavily influence a woman's decision to pursue further education. Despite advances in gender equality and support systems, mothers returning to education often face obstacles such as limited access to affordable childcare, rigid academic schedules, and a lack of institutional support. Conversely, they may also find opportunities for growth, empowerment, and community building through educational participation.

This chapter establishes the context for the study by examining the cultural, social, and institutional factors that shape mothers' return to education in Malta. It considers how traditional gender norms, societal expectations, and evolving constructions of motherhood influence educational access and participation. My positionality—as a mature student, mother, and social worker—also informs the perspective taken in this study and is addressed in a dedicated section. The chapter is organized into four main parts: first, it explores the cultural and historical backdrop of gender roles in Malta; second, it analyses educational opportunities and challenges for mothers; third, it outlines the rationale and research questions guiding the study and finally it presents a reflexive account of my positionality. This foundation leads into the next chapter, which reviews the existing literature and situates the study within relevant theoretical and empirical frameworks.

Locating the Maternal: Gender, Power, and Tradition in Malta

Malta is a Mediterranean island nation with a rich cultural heritage shaped by centuries of colonisation by the Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Normans, and British. These historical influences have contributed to a deeply ingrained set of patriarchal values that continue to shape contemporary Maltese society, particularly in relation to gender roles (Sollars, 2018). Despite Malta's modern advancements and its membership in the European Union, traditional norms persist, with men often viewed as breadwinners and women as primary caregivers (Vella, 2022). This enduring gendered division of roles reflects the broader structure of patriarchy—a social system in which men hold disproportionate power and privilege across political, economic, and cultural domains. Patriarchy not only reinforces male dominance but also devalues traits and roles associated with women, resulting in systemic gender inequality (Walby, 2023).

The Roman Catholic Church has a considerable influence in Malta, shaping social attitudes towards gender roles. The Church's teachings often promote traditional views on marriage and family, emphasising the role of women as mothers and homemakers (Cassar et al., 2023). These religious values contribute to maintaining patriarchal norms within society.

Family is a cornerstone of Maltese society, and traditional gender roles within families remain strong. Research indicates that Maltese families often adhere to conventional roles, with men being the primary earners and women responsible for domestic duties and child-rearing (Abela & Walker, 2013). This division reinforces the patriarchal structure by limiting women's economic independence and reinforcing male authority in the household.

Women in Malta face challenges in achieving equal participation in the workforce. The gender pay gap and lower employment rates for women highlight ongoing economic inequalities (Human Rights Directorate, 2021; NCPE Annual Report 2021). While there have been efforts to promote gender equality in the workplace, traditional views on women's roles and insufficient support for working mothers continue to hinder noteworthy progress.

Malta has implemented various laws and policies aimed at promoting gender equality. The Domestic Violence Act and the Equality for Men and Women Act are examples of legislative measures designed to protect women's rights (Government of Malta, 2019).

However, the effectiveness of these policies is often undermined by deep cultural biases and the lack of sustainable enforcement mechanisms.

When it comes to political representation, Malta has made strides in gender equality, yet women remain underrepresented in politics. As of the latest elections, women held only a small percentage of seats in the Maltese Parliament (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022). This underrepresentation limits women's influence on policymaking and reinforces the patriarchal structure by maintaining male dominance in political leadership.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and activism around gender equality in Malta. Women's rights organisations and social movements are increasingly challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for greater gender equality in all areas of society (Briguglio, 2022). These efforts indicate a shift towards questioning and eventually dismantling patriarchal structures.

Motherhood, Culture, and Educational Access in Malta

This section gives an overview of the educational opportunities available for adult learners in Malta.

The Directorate for Lifelong Learning in Malta offers a range of courses for adult learners, including mothers. These courses cover various subjects and are often scheduled in the evenings to accommodate working parents. From a feminist perspective, providing flexible learning opportunities is crucial in challenging traditional gender roles that expect women to prioritise family over personal development. Studies indicate that accessible adult education can empower women by enhancing their skills and knowledge, contributing to greater gender equality (Kassama & Eschenbacher, 2023).

The Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST) provides numerous vocational education and training programmes with flexible learning options, such as part-time courses. This flexibility is essential for mothers who need to balance education pursuits with childcare responsibilities. Feminist scholars argue that vocational training can be a powerful tool for women's economic empowerment, offering pathways to better employment opportunities and financial independence (Abid et al., 2020).

The University of Malta offers various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes with part-time and evening classes, facilitating access for mothers. Additionally, support services such as academic advising, counselling, and childcare facilities help address the unique challenges faced by student parents. From a social constructionist viewpoint, these support structures are critical in reshaping societal perceptions of mothers as solely caregivers, instead of recognising their potential as learners and professionals (Szalkowitz & Andrewartha, 2024).

The rise of online and distance learning programmes provides a flexible alternative for mothers who may struggle with the demands of traditional classroom settings. Institutions like MCAST and the University of Malta offer online courses that enable mothers to study from home and at their own pace. This mode of learning aligns with feminist goals of increasing accessibility and breaking down barriers that women face in education (Brooks, 2012).

Community-based organisations in Malta offer educational programmes tailored to the needs of mothers, including parenting courses, financial literacy workshops, and vocational training. These programmes often operate in supportive community environments, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. Feminist perspectives emphasise the importance of community-based learning as it can address the specific needs of women and provide a collaborative and supportive learning environment (Falk-Raphael et al., 2004).

The Maltese government has implemented initiatives to promote adult education and lifelong learning, such as the Directorate for Lifelong Learning and the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC) training programmes. These initiatives include financial subsidies that make education more affordable for mothers. Social constructionist theories highlight the role of government policies in shaping educational opportunities and the importance of inclusive policies that consider the diverse needs of women (Rossin-Slater & Stearns, 2020).

Various scholarships and financial aid options, such as the Malta Government Scholarship Scheme and the Get Qualified Scheme, provide financial support to mothers pursuing higher education and vocational training. These financial supports can alleviate some of

the economic burdens associated with returning to education, which is crucial in promoting gender equality (Ardissone et al., 2021).

Non-formal education opportunities, including workshops, seminars, and short courses, offer mothers a chance to enhance specific skills without the commitment of a full degree programme. These opportunities are often provided by community centres, non-governmental organisations, and private institutions. From a feminist perspective, non-formal education is vital as it can be more accessible and responsive to the immediate needs of women, promoting their personal and professional growth (Hawthorne, 2001).

The educational opportunities available for mothers in Malta are diverse and include adult learning programs, vocational training, university courses, online learning, community-based education, government initiatives, scholarships, and non-formal education. Taken together, these educational pathways reflect a growing recognition of the need to support mothers as lifelong learners. While progress has been made through flexible programmes, financial aid, and community-based initiatives, access alone does not guarantee equity. The persistent influence of traditional gender roles and structural barriers means that mothers' educational journeys remain shaped by broader socio-cultural dynamics. Addressing these challenges requires not only expanding opportunities, but also critically examining how motherhood and learning intersect within the Maltese context.

Aims and Rationale for the Study

The intersection of motherhood and education remains an underexplored area of academic inquiry, despite its significant implications for societal development and gender equality. Addressing these gaps is crucial for understanding and improving the opportunities and challenges faced by mothers seeking education.

This research thus aims to explore the lived experiences of mothers in Malta who have returned to formal education, with a particular focus on the opportunities they perceive and the challenges they face in balancing academic aspirations with familial responsibilities.

The following research questions guide the study:

What motivates mothers in Malta to return to education?

What challenges do they encounter in balancing educational pursuits with their roles as mothers?

What forms of support or barriers do they experience at the institutional, familial, and societal levels?

How do these women perceive the impact of returning to education on their identities, relationships, and prospects?

This study is informed by feminist and social constructionist theoretical frameworks. A feminist perspective provides the tools to critically explore how gendered power structures and cultural expectations influence mothers' access to and experiences within education. Complementing this, a social constructionist approach emphasises how meanings attached to motherhood, womanhood, and learning are shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts, rather than being fixed or universal. One of the primary reasons for the lack of research on mothers and education is systemic bias within academia. Historically, much of educational and sociological research has centred on male-dominated experiences or broader societal trends, sidelining issues specific to women and mothers. According to Ridgeway (2011), gender biases shape what is considered a "legitimate" area of study, often relegating women's issues to secondary importance. Additionally, motherhood is often viewed through a lens of traditional roles, which frames mothers primarily as caregivers rather than as individuals with aspirations beyond the home. This cultural stereotype contributes to the lack of attention paid to how motherhood intersects with other areas, such as education (Arendell, 2000).

Researching mothers in education also presents unique methodological challenges. Mothers who return to education often navigate complex schedules that include parenting, work, and study, making them a difficult population to recruit and retain for studies. Furthermore, data collection can be skewed by self-selection bias, as mothers facing significant barriers may not participate in research, leaving an incomplete picture of the population's experiences (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). The complexity of maternal experiences—shaped by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and marital status—necessitates intersectional frameworks, though these require substantial time and resources (Crenshaw, 1989). Another significant factor is the lack of prioritization of mothers' education in policymaking and research funding. Policymakers often focus on broad educational reforms or workforce development, neglecting the unique barriers

faced by mothers. According to UNESCO (2021), global education initiatives frequently overlook adult learners, particularly women with caregiving responsibilities. Without adequate funding or institutional support, researchers may avoid exploring topics that require complex longitudinal studies or interdisciplinary collaboration. This results in a scarcity of evidence to inform policy and practice, perpetuating the cycle of neglect. The lack of research on mothers and education has significant societal consequences. It limits our understanding of how educational opportunities can empower mothers and improve outcomes for their families. Research shows that educated mothers are more likely to prioritize education for their children, breaking cycles of poverty and inequality (UNICEF, 2019). Addressing the research gap could therefore have a multiplier effect, benefiting not only mothers but also their families and communities.

This research is timely and relevant, as global trends highlight an increasing number of mature students and non-traditional learners entering higher education. By examining their journeys qualitatively, this study seeks to uncover the socio-cultural, institutional, and personal factors that shape their educational experiences. The insights gained will contribute to policy discussions, academic support services, and broader discourses on gender and education.

Intersections of Self and Study: Reflecting on Positionality

As a mature woman returning to formal education later in life, my research journey is deeply intertwined with my narrative. This study is not only academically motivated but also emerges from a place of lived experience. Having spent many years dedicated primarily to the care of my family and the upbringing of my young children, returning to university was a significant, and at times daunting, transition. It was a choice made not out of convenience, but out of a profound belief in the transformative power of education.

I was raised in a deeply rooted Catholic household, surrounded by a lineage of strong, resilient women. My mother, grandmothers, and aunts each played formative roles in shaping my worldview, instilling in me the conviction that devotion to family and nurturing the well-being of children is both a privilege and a vocation. These women, while perhaps not all formally educated, embodied values of discipline, moral clarity, and unwavering commitment to others. Their legacy lives on in me.

However, the values I inherited never stood in contradiction with the pursuit of knowledge. Rather, they formed the foundation upon which my return to education was built. I have always regarded learning as a lifelong endeavour—one that enriches not only the individual but also those in her care. It was this ethos that eventually propelled me back into academia.

I approach this study both as an academic and as a practitioner, informed by my professional role as a social worker, where I routinely witness the structural barriers faced by disadvantaged mothers, particularly single mothers or those experiencing financial insecurity and a lack of support systems. These women often grapple with the intersection of caregiving responsibilities, poverty, social stigma, and limited institutional flexibility, which collectively hinder their ability to pursue or sustain educational goals. My dual identity as a researcher and practitioner provides me with a unique vantage point from which to understand and interpret the complexities of their experiences. At the same time, I remain critically aware of how my journey, though aligned in some ways, differs from those of my participants. While shared experience can facilitate rapport and trust, it also carries the risk of over-identification or assumption. I therefore engage in continuous reflexivity throughout this study, consciously examining how my personal biases, assumptions, and privileges might shape the research process, from data collection to analysis.

This research, exploring the experiences of mothers who return to education after childbirth, is therefore informed by empathy, shared identity, and personal insight. I am both an observer and, in many ways, a participant. My positionality as a mature student and a mother allows me to engage with this subject not only with academic rigour, but with heartfelt understanding. I hope that this perspective contributes authenticity and depth to the study, while also honouring the experiences of the women who so generously shared their stories.

Overview of Chapters

In this introductory chapter, I have outlined the background and context of the study, explored the cultural and structural influences on motherhood and education in Malta, presented the research aims and questions and reflected on my positionality as a researcher.

Chapter 2 focuses on the literature review, which establishes the academic context for the study by identifying key research on mothers in education, mature students, and gendered barriers to learning. It also highlights gaps in the existing literature, particularly within the Maltese context.

In Chapter 3, the methodology is presented. The chapter discusses the research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, and ethical considerations, with particular attention to how feminist and social constructionist perspectives inform the study.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings, analysis and a discussion, organised thematically to reflect the experiences, challenges, and opportunities encountered by mothers returning to education.

Chapter 5 provides the conclusions and recommendations. It summarises the key findings, discusses their implications for policy and practice, acknowledges the study's limitations, and offers suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The aim of this literature review is to critically examine the existing body of research on the motivations behind mothers' return to education, situating the discussion within broader structural, cultural, and personal contexts. While mainstream educational discourse often frames adult learning as a neutral or meritocratic endeavour, feminist and gender studies perspectives emphasize that such experiences are deeply gendered and shaped by intersecting social inequalities. This chapter foregrounds the complex realities faced by mothers, particularly those who were unable to complete formal education earlier in life due to systemic barriers such as socio-economic disadvantage, caregiving responsibilities, or gendered cultural expectations. It explores how motivations to return to education are not only personal ambitions but are often entangled with broader issues of identity reconstruction, economic survival, and the desire to challenge intergenerational patterns of exclusion.

Drawing on feminist theorists such as bell hooks, who conceptualizes education as a space of liberation, and critical sociological frameworks that view education as a site of both empowerment and social reproduction, this review interrogates how women's educational choices are shaped by power, privilege, and constraint. By integrating studies from various cultural and geographic contexts, including the Maltese setting, where traditional gender roles remain influential, this chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of why mothers return to education and how their journeys are situated within larger structures of gendered opportunity and constraint.

Although many women complete formal education before becoming mothers, this is not a universal experience. A significant number of women interrupt or delay their educational trajectories due to early caregiving responsibilities, socioeconomic barriers, or cultural expectations. Others, despite having completed their earlier education, find themselves needing to return later in life to upgrade skills, shift career paths, or pursue long-deferred personal goals. This chapter explores the complex and multifaceted reasons why mothers return to education, drawing on international literature to contextualize the issue and identifying implications relevant to the Maltese context.

To begin with, I delve into the social construction of motherhood, examining how cultural narratives and societal norms shape maternal identity and roles. I then look at diverse feminist perspectives, highlighting the significance of intersectionality in understanding varied maternal realities. Subsequently, I focus on mothering in Malta, exploring prevailing expectations and the evolving social realities faced by mothers in this sociocultural context. I further examine the often-overlooked burdens of motherhood, including unpaid domestic labour, the significant mental load, and the pervasive emotional labour inherent in the mothering role.

The second part of the chapter shifts focus to the educational pursuits of mothers, beginning with an exploration of the emotional and cognitive determinants that underpin their engagement in learning. Subsequently, the discussion addresses the significant challenges mothers encounter when navigating their return to or continuation of education. Finally, the analysis broadens to consider the profound impact of maternal education, positioning it as a crucial catalyst for wider societal development by challenging traditional gender roles, empowering women, and fostering positive intergenerational and community-wide benefits.

To comprehensively gather relevant literature for this review, the following search strategy was employed across several key academic databases. These included the University of Malta's HyDi portal, ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre), JSTOR, Google Scholar, Academic Search Complete (EBSCOhost), ScienceDirect, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. The search utilised a broad array of keywords and search terms to capture the multifaceted nature of the research topic, encompassing core concepts such as 'Maternal Identity,' 'Maternal Education,' 'Adult Learning,' 'Educational Re-entry,' 'Women's Empowerment,' and 'Feminist Theory.' Additionally, terms related to 'Intersectionality,' 'Gender Roles,' 'Gender and Education,' the various forms of unpaid work like 'Unpaid Labour,' 'Emotional Labour,' 'Cognitive Labour,' 'Mental Load,' and 'Third Shift,' as well as the 'Gendered Division of Labor' in 'Care Work' were included. To ensure contextual relevance, especially to the Maltese context, terms such as 'Maltese Society,' 'Sociocultural Norms,' 'Family Policy,' and 'Work-Life Balance' were also integral. A primary Boolean search string – ("mothers" OR "parenting women" OR "female caregivers") AND ("returning to education" OR "adult learners" OR "mature students") AND ("challenges" OR "barriers" OR "obstacles")

AND ("opportunities" OR "support systems" OR "empowerment") AND ("Malta" OR "Mediterranean" OR "Europe") – was used. The search was primarily focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and dissertations, with an emphasis on literature published in the last twenty to twenty-five years to ensure contemporary relevance, although seminal theoretical works were included regardless of their publication date. Initial screening involved reviewing titles and abstracts, followed by a full-text assessment of potentially relevant sources to determine their final inclusion. Furthermore, the reference lists of key identified articles and books were manually scanned to uncover additional relevant publications not captured through the initial database searches.

Maternal Education as a Catalyst for Societal Development

The role of mothers in society has long been a subject of discussion in both social constructionist and feminist theories. Educated mothers play a crucial role in shaping future generations, influencing not only their children but also broader societal norms and values.

The importance of having educated mothers in society cannot be emphasised enough. From a social constructionist perspective, educated mothers challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to the redefinition of societal norms. From a feminist viewpoint, education is a vital tool for achieving gender equality and empowering women.

Education empowers women with knowledge, skills, and confidence, enabling them to participate more actively in various social, economic, and political spheres (Weiner-Levy, 2006).

Mothers who have access to various educational opportunities are more likely to instil values of equality and critical thinking in their children, fostering an environment where gender biases are questioned and dismantled (Tighe & Davis-Kean, 2021). This, in turn, helps in building a more equitable society where both men and women can pursue their dreams without being limited by traditional gender roles. Moreover, educated mothers often become role models within their communities, inspiring other women to seek education and challenge patriarchal norms.

From a feminist viewpoint, education is a fundamental right that should be accessible to all women. Feminist theory argues that the empowerment of women through education is essential for achieving gender equality and social justice (Yoder et al., 2012).

Educated mothers are better equipped to advocate for their rights and the rights of their children, contributing to the overall well-being and progress of society.

Education also enables mothers to make informed decisions about their health, finances, and family planning, leading to improved outcomes for themselves and their families. Feminists emphasise that educated mothers are crucial for breaking the cycle of poverty and dependency, as they are more likely to seek employment and contribute to the household income (Stone & O'Shea, 2013). This economic independence further reinforces their agency and autonomy within the family and society.

The benefits of having educated mothers extend beyond individual families. Research indicates that children of educated mothers are more likely to achieve higher educational outcomes and exhibit better health and nutritional status (Alderman & Headey, 2017). Educated mothers are more likely to engage in practices that promote early childhood development, such as reading to their children and encouraging school attendance (Adair et al, 2008).

Furthermore, educated mothers contribute to the social capital of their communities by participating in social networks and community organisations. Their involvement in these networks fosters a sense of community cohesion and collective action, which is vital for addressing social issues and promoting '*community development*' (Sen, 2001, p.195).

Emotional and Cognitive Determinants of Educational Engagement Among Mothers

One of the primary psychological motivations for mothers returning to education is the pursuit of self-fulfilment and personal growth. Education offers an avenue for intellectual stimulation and the satisfaction of lifelong learning. Many mothers experience a strong intrinsic motivation to achieve individual goals and fulfil aspirations that may have been postponed due to '*familial responsibilities*' (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p.416). This drive for self-actualisation aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of

needs, where achieving one's full potential is a significant motivating factor (Healy, 2016).

Returning to education can significantly enhance a mother's self-esteem and confidence. Education provides an opportunity to develop new skills and competencies, which can lead to a greater sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995). This boost in self-confidence is particularly important for mothers who may have experienced a loss of identity or self-worth while focusing primarily on their caregiving roles. Research indicates that educational attainment is positively correlated with self-esteem, suggesting that completing educational goals, can lead to a more positive self-concept (Orth, 2017).

Many mothers are motivated to return to education by the desire to serve as positive role models for their children. By pursuing further education, mothers demonstrate the value of lifelong learning and the importance of perseverance and hard work. This modelling behaviour can instil similar values in their children, fostering a culture of educational aspiration within the family (Eccles, 2011). Mothers often express a desire to inspire their children to pursue their own educational and professional goals, thus contributing to the intergenerational transmission of educational values (Tighe & Davis-Kean, 2021). In a longitudinal study, Mallman and Lee (2017) found that mature-aged female students often spoke of education as a "legacy" they hoped to pass on to their children, especially daughters. Education, in this sense, is seen not just as a personal pursuit but as a family and intergenerational investment.

The pursuit of economic stability and better opportunities for their families is a significant emotional motivator for many mothers. Higher educational attainment is associated with better job prospects, higher salaries, and improved job security (Carnevale et al., 2013). As the labour market increasingly demands higher qualifications and digital skills, mothers may return to education to reskill, upskill, or change professions (Dockery & Bawa, 2018). For others, returning to work after a caregiving gap requires updated credentials or new competencies, especially in fields affected by rapid technological change. For many mothers, the decision to return to education is driven by the need to secure a better future for their children, providing them with financial stability and access to more opportunities. Baker (2009) noted that

returning to education is often framed as a strategic decision for mothers seeking financial independence or more secure employment, particularly in single-parent households. This economic motivation is often connected with a deep emotional commitment to improving their family's quality of life.

The support of family, friends, and educational institutions plays a crucial role in motivating mothers to return to education. Social support can provide the necessary encouragement and resources to pursue educational goals, helping mothers overcome barriers and persist in their studies (Wilcox & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Emotional support from spouses, parents, and peers can alleviate the stress and challenges associated with balancing educational pursuits with family responsibilities. Additionally, being part of a community of learners can foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose, further motivating mothers to succeed (Madden, 2018).

Returning to education can also mitigate the isolation some mothers feel during extended periods of caregiving. The classroom becomes a space of social engagement, intellectual stimulation, and connection to broader society (Tett, 2004). For some women, especially those who have experienced postpartum depression or social exclusion, education contributes positively to their mental health and self-efficacy. Baxter and Britton (2001) point out that the social environment of education — interactions with peers, tutors, and mentors — is particularly valued by returning mothers. These networks not only provide emotional support but also enhance retention and academic success.

For some mothers, returning to education is a way to overcome past regrets and unfinished business. They may have interrupted their education due to early motherhood, financial constraints, or other life circumstances. Life events such as teenage pregnancy, economic hardship, family expectations, or social norms often push young women out of education prematurely (Edwards, 1992). In some cases, education was not prioritized within the family or community, especially for girls, leading to early entry into the workforce or domestic roles. The opportunity to complete their education can provide a sense of closure and accomplishment, helping to heal the emotional wounds from the past (Mezirow, 1991). This transformative learning process allows mothers to reframe their life stories and gain a renewed sense of agency and purpose.

This is supported by O'Shea (2020), who emphasizes the transformative potential of education in enabling mature women learners to "rewrite" their narratives, shift internalized limitations, and develop new aspirations. Returning to education is thus both an intellectual and emotional journey.

Navigating the Return: Challenges Encountered by Mothers in Pursuing Education

Returning to education after several years or even decades, particularly for mothers who paused their studies to focus on work or family responsibilities, presents numerous challenges deeply rooted in social structures and gender norms. The difficulties mothers face when returning to education are largely influenced by socially constructed roles and expectations that have been ingrained throughout time.

One significant challenge is the prevailing cultural narrative that frames mothers primarily as caregivers, responsible for children's upbringing and household maintenance. This societal expectation often leads to a lack of support for mothers pursuing education, as their efforts are viewed as secondary to their domestic responsibilities (Allen, 2023). This can result in limited availability of flexible learning options, childcare services, and institutional support tailored to the needs of studying mothers.

Moreover, social constructionism highlights the internalisation of these societal norms by mothers themselves, which can lead to feelings of guilt and inadequacy. The pressure to conform to traditional maternal roles can cause mothers to forfeit their educational aspirations, thereby limiting their opportunities for personal and professional growth (Arendell, 2000).

From a feminist standpoint, the barriers mothers face in returning to education are viewed through the lens of gender inequality and patriarchy. Feminist theory emphasises that educational institutions and policies often reflect and reinforce gender biases that place women at a disadvantage, particularly mothers (Rose, 2002). One key difficulty is the structural inequality in access to education. Mothers often encounter financial constraints, as they may need to balance the costs of tuition with household expenses and childcare. Feminist scholars argue that the lack of financial aid and

scholarships specifically targeted at mothers increases these challenges, hindering their ability to pursue further education (Acker, 1992).

Additionally, the intersection of multiple identities, such as gender, race, and class, further increases the difficulties for many mothers. Women of colour and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face greater obstacles due to systemic racism and classism, which can limit their access to resources and support networks (Roksa et al., 2017).

The inflexibility of educational institutions also poses a significant barrier. Traditional academic schedules and program structures often do not accommodate the needs of mothers, who may require part-time options, online courses, or childcare facilities on campus (Sutton, 2022).

The difficulties encountered by mothers returning to education have far-reaching implications. On an individual level, these barriers can lead to lower educational attainment, reduced career prospects, and perpetuation of economic dependency (Houle et al, 2006). This not only affects the mothers themselves but also has a ripple effect on their families and communities.

From a societal perspective, the underrepresentation of educated mothers in the workforce limits the diversity of perspectives and talents in various professional fields. This, in turn, hampers social and economic development, as the potential contributions of a significant portion of the population remain untapped (Morley, 2013).

Motherhood and Society: Examining the Cultural Narratives That Shape Maternal Identity

Motherhood is often perceived as a natural and universal phenomenon, intrinsically linked to biology and reproduction. However, social constructionist theory challenges this essentialist view, emphasising that motherhood is a socially constructed role shaped by cultural, historical, and political contexts. This perspective highlights how societal norms, values, and power dynamics define what it means to be a mother, often reinforcing gender hierarchies and marginalising those who do not conform to dominant ideals. By exploring the concept of motherhood through a social constructionist lens, we can uncover the underlying social processes that shape maternal roles and experiences.

Social constructionism posits that reality is not inherent but created through social interactions and shared meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Applied to motherhood, this perspective suggests that the meaning and expectations associated with being a mother are not fixed but vary across cultures and historical periods. For instance, in Western societies, the ideal of "intensive mothering" emerged in the late 20th century, emphasising a child-centred, emotionally involved, and time-intensive approach to parenting as coined by Hays (1996), cited in Sahlar et al. (2020). This model reflects specific cultural and economic conditions, such as the rise of consumer capitalism and the increased focus on child development as a marker of social status. In contrast, other cultures may prioritise collective caregiving or emphasise different aspects of maternal responsibility, illustrating the variability of maternal norms.

From a social constructionist perspective, motherhood is deeply intertwined with gender norms. Traditional gender roles often portray women as inherently nurturing and self-sacrificing, framing motherhood as a natural extension of femininity (Rich, 1976). These norms are perpetuated through various social institutions, including media, education, and religion, which reinforce the expectation that women should prioritise caregiving over other pursuits. Such constructions not only limit women's opportunities for personal and professional growth but also marginalise those who deviate from these norms, such as child-free women, working mothers, and non-heteronormative parents.

Social constructionist theory also emphasises the importance of intersectionality in shaping maternal experiences. For example, the dominant ideal of motherhood in many Western societies is often based on white, middle-class norms, marginalising mothers from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Collins, 2009). African American mothers, for instance, have historically been portrayed as either overly self-sacrificing "matriarchs" or neglectful "welfare queens," reflecting racist and classist stereotypes that stigmatise their parenting practices (Roberts, 2010). Such constructions reveal how motherhood is not only shaped by gender but also by broader systems of power and inequality.

Social constructionist theory also draws attention to the role of institutions in shaping the concept of motherhood. Governments, for instance, influence maternal roles through policies related to family leave, childcare, and reproductive rights. In many countries,

limited parental leave and inadequate childcare support place disproportionate burdens on mothers, reinforcing the expectation that they should bear primary responsibility for child-rearing (Orloff, 1993). Additionally, legal and medical institutions play a significant role in defining motherhood, from regulating reproductive technologies to shaping discourses around "good" and "bad" parenting practices (Foucault, 1978). These institutional influences underscore how motherhood is constructed and regulated within specific power structures.

While dominant constructions of motherhood often perpetuate inequality, they are not immutable. Social movements and alternative discourses have challenged traditional maternal roles, advocating for more inclusive and equitable models. Feminist and LGBTQ+ activists, for instance, have emphasised the diversity of maternal experiences, rejecting the notion that motherhood is solely the domain of cisgender, heterosexual women (Ryan-Flood, 2009). Similarly, global movements advocating for parental leave, affordable childcare, and reproductive justice seek to redefine motherhood in ways that prioritise autonomy and equity. These efforts illustrate the potential for social change to reshape maternal roles and expectations.

Motherhood Through an Intersectional Lens: Exploring Diverse Maternal Realities

Feminist perspectives on motherhood also emphasise the importance of intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to highlight how overlapping systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, and classism—shape individual experiences. For example, the ideal of "intensive mothering," characterised by constant emotional and physical availability to children (Hays, 1996), is often unattainable for women of colour and working-class mothers who face structural barriers such as low wages, lack of access to childcare, and systemic discrimination. Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (2009) have highlighted how African American women have historically been denied the privileges associated with traditional notions of motherhood, instead being forced into caregiving roles for white families during slavery and beyond. Thus, the lived experiences of motherhood are deeply influenced by race, class, and other intersecting identities.

From a feminist political economy perspective, motherhood is closely tied to the unpaid labour that sustains capitalist economies. Silvia Federici (2004) and other Marxist feminists have argued that the reproductive labour of mothers, including childcare, cooking, and housework, is devalued because it is performed outside the formal economy. This "invisible labour" is essential to the functioning of capitalism but remains uncompensated and unrecognised. Federici called for a revaluation of reproductive labour and policies that redistribute caregiving responsibilities more equitably across genders. In contemporary discussions, feminists advocate for parental leave policies, affordable childcare, and universal basic income as measures to address the economic exploitation of mothers.

Feminist scholars have long argued that motherhood is a socially constructed role that reinforces patriarchal power structures. Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) famously critiqued the notion that motherhood is a woman's "natural destiny," asserting instead that societal norms and expectations confine women to the domestic sphere. Adrienne Rich (1976) further explored this idea in her seminal work *Of Woman Born*, distinguishing between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood. While the experience of nurturing and caregiving can be fulfilling and empowering, the institution of motherhood often imposes rigid expectations, such as self-sacrifice, moral purity, and unconditional devotion to children. These expectations, Rich argued, serve to maintain women's subordination by limiting their opportunities for self-actualization and economic independence.

Motherhood is a universal experience with significant social, cultural, and political implications. It has often been romanticised and idealised as a cornerstone of womanhood, yet this idealisation can mask the structural inequalities and restrictive gender norms that it perpetuates. From a feminist perspective, motherhood is not merely a biological or emotional experience but a socially constructed role that is shaped by patriarchy, capitalism, and cultural norms. By examining motherhood through feminist theory, we can better understand its complexities and advocate for a more equitable society (Neyer and Bernardi, 2011).

The feminist critique of motherhood also includes a focus on bodily autonomy and reproductive justice. Access to contraception, abortion, and healthcare is fundamental to

women's ability to choose whether, when, and how to become mothers. The lack of reproductive autonomy disproportionately affects marginalised women, particularly those in countries with restrictive abortion laws or inadequate healthcare systems (Correa, 1995). Feminists argue that true empowerment requires recognising women's agency over their bodies and rejecting coercive policies that either force or prevent motherhood.

While much feminist critique has focused on the oppressive aspects of motherhood, there is also a growing movement to reconceptualise motherhood in empowering and inclusive ways. Queer and trans-inclusive feminist perspectives challenge heteronormative assumptions about who can be a mother, advocating for recognition of diverse family structures and parenting roles (Ryan-Flood, 2009). Ecofeminists, such as Vandana Shiva, have also linked motherhood to environmental activism, framing it as a site of resistance to ecological degradation and corporate exploitation. These new interpretations highlight that, when liberated from patriarchal limitations, motherhood can become a powerful source of agency and solidarity.

Mothering in Malta: Identity, Expectations and Social Realities

Motherhood in Maltese culture is not only a personal experience but also a communal one. Family plays a central role in Maltese society, and mothers are often seen as the "heart" of the family, responsible for maintaining familial bonds and traditions. Maltese mothers are celebrated for their resilience, sacrifice, and dedication to their children's well-being. Traditional sayings, such as "Ommi hija l-qalb tad-dar" (My mother is the heart of the home), underscore the cultural reverence for maternal figures (Cassar Pullicino, 1992).

However, this idealization of motherhood also places significant pressure on Maltese women to conform to societal expectations. Women are often expected to prioritize their children's needs above their own and to embody an image of unwavering strength and selflessness. These cultural norms can perpetuate gender inequality by limiting women's opportunities for personal and professional development (Abela, 1994).

In recent decades, Malta has undergone rapid social and economic transformations, leading to shifts in the concept of motherhood. The rise of dual-income households,

increased access to higher education, and changing gender roles have challenged traditional maternal norms. Maltese women are now more likely to pursue careers alongside motherhood, reflecting broader global trends toward gender equality.

Policy changes have also influenced maternal experiences in Malta. The introduction of paid maternity leave and free childcare services has supported women's ability to balance work and family responsibilities (European Commission, 2021). These measures have helped to ease some of the burdens associated with traditional motherhood, though challenges remain, such as the gender pay gap and societal expectations around caregiving.

Moreover, attitudes toward motherhood are becoming more diverse, reflecting the growing influence of multiculturalism and progressive social movements. Non-traditional family structures, including single-parent households and LGBTQ+ parenting, are gradually gaining acceptance in Maltese society. These developments highlight a shift away from rigid, one-size-fits-all definitions of motherhood toward more inclusive and flexible models.

Despite these changes, religion continues to play a significant role in shaping perceptions of motherhood in Malta. The Catholic Church remains a powerful institution, and its teachings on family life and gender roles continue to influence societal attitudes. For instance, debates around reproductive rights, such as access to contraception and abortion, illustrate the tension between traditional religious values and modern feminist perspectives (Dibben et al., 2023). While Maltese women have made significant strides in asserting their autonomy, the influence of religious doctrine often complicates efforts to redefine motherhood in more progressive terms.

Although Malta has made progress in supporting mothers through policy and social change, challenges persist. The cultural expectation that mothers bear the primary responsibility for caregiving can create significant stress and limit women's participation in the workforce. Additionally, the lack of comprehensive support for fathers in caregiving roles reinforces traditional gender roles, placing an unequal burden on mothers (Satariano and Curtis, 2018).

The Gendered Economy of Care: Unpaid Domestic Labour, the Third shift and emotional labour

Motherhood, often romanticised as a fulfilling and noble endeavour, comes with significant costs that are frequently overlooked. Beyond the physical and emotional investments, mothers bear an immense burden of unpaid labour, encompassing childcare, household responsibilities, and the "third shift," which involves the mental load, cognitive labour, and emotional labour associated with caregiving (Dean et al., 2021).

Unpaid labour refers to the work performed without direct financial compensation, including childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks. According to feminist economists, this labour is essential to sustaining economies yet remains undervalued and disproportionately performed by women (Folbre et al., 2014). Mothers, in particular, bear the brunt of this work, dedicating countless hours to caregiving and domestic duties.

Studies have shown that even in dual-income households, mothers perform most of the unpaid labour. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), women globally spend on average, two to three times more hours on unpaid work than men. In the United States, for example, women perform an average of 4.1 hours of unpaid labour daily, compared to 2.7 hours for men (Bianchi et al., 2012). This unequal distribution of labour reinforces traditional gender roles, limits women's participation in the workforce, and exacerbates economic inequality.

In addition to the physical tasks associated with motherhood, many mothers also bear the mental load of managing household responsibilities. The mental load, a term popularised by sociologist Susan Walzer (1996), refers to the invisible cognitive labour involved in planning, organising, and coordinating family life. This includes remembering appointments, managing schedules, buying groceries, and ensuring that children's needs are met (Barada et al., 2024). Unlike physical tasks, the mental load is often continuous, requiring constant attention and emotional investment.

The unequal distribution of cognitive labour contributes to gender inequality within households. Studies have found that even in partnerships where physical tasks are shared

more equitably, women often remain the primary managers of household logistics (Daminger, 2019). This "third shift" of cognitive labour adds to the already significant workload of mothers, leaving little time for rest or self-care. Emotional labour, a concept introduced by Arlie Hochschild (1979), refers to the work of managing one's own emotions and the emotions of others to create a harmonious environment (Muller, 2019). In the context of motherhood, emotional labour involves comforting children, resolving conflicts, and providing emotional support to family members. Mothers are often expected to absorb the emotional needs of their children and partners, a responsibility that can be both rewarding and exhausting.

The societal expectation that mothers should always be nurturing and patient amplifies the emotional labour they perform. This expectation is reinforced by cultural norms and media representations that idealise motherhood as a selfless and joyful experience. However, this idealisation can obscure the toll that emotional labour takes on mothers' mental health, contributing to burnout, anxiety, and depression (Rizzo et al., 2013).

The hidden costs of motherhood have far-reaching implications for gender equality, economic systems, and maternal well-being. Economically, the unpaid labour performed by mothers contributes to the reproduction of the workforce, yet it is excluded from formal measures of productivity, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Federici, 2014). This exclusion perpetuates the undervaluation of caregiving and reinforces the economic marginalisation of women.

Socially, the unequal burden of unpaid labour, mental load, and emotional labour reinforces patriarchal structures that limit women's opportunities for personal and professional growth. It also perpetuates traditional gender roles, making it difficult for men to participate fully in caregiving and household responsibilities. Psychologically, the cumulative burden of unpaid labour and the third shift can have significant consequences for mothers' mental health. Research has linked the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities to higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression among mothers (Craig & Mullan, 2011).

Why is the Topic of Mothers and Education So Little Researched?

Systemic Biases in Research

One of the primary reasons for the lack of research on mothers and education is systemic bias within academia. Historically, much of educational and sociological research has centred on male-dominated experiences or broader societal trends, sidelining issues specific to women and mothers. According to Ridgeway (2011), gender biases shape what is considered a “legitimate” area of study, often relegating women’s issues to secondary importance.

Additionally, motherhood is often viewed through a lens of traditional roles, which frames mothers primarily as caregivers rather than as individuals with aspirations beyond the home. This cultural stereotype contributes to the lack of attention paid to how motherhood intersects with other areas, such as education (Arendell, 2000).

Methodological Challenges

Researching mothers in education also presents unique methodological challenges. Mothers who return to education often navigate complex schedules that involve parenting, work, and study, making them a difficult population to recruit and retain for studies. Furthermore, data collection can be skewed by self-selection bias, as mothers facing significant barriers may not participate in research, leaving an incomplete picture of the population’s experiences (Stone & O’Shea, 2019).

The diversity of mothers’ experiences—shaped by factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and marital status—adds another layer of complexity. Researchers must adopt intersectional frameworks to fully capture the nuances of these experiences, but such approaches require extensive time and resources (Crenshaw, 1989).

Lack of Policy Focus and Funding

Another significant factor is the lack of prioritization of mothers’ education in policymaking and research funding. Policymakers often focus on broad educational reforms or workforce development, neglecting the unique barriers that mothers face.

According to UNESCO (2021), global education initiatives frequently overlook adult learners, particularly women with caregiving responsibilities.

Without adequate funding or institutional support, researchers may avoid exploring topics that require complex longitudinal studies or interdisciplinary collaboration. This results in a scarcity of evidence to inform policy and practice, perpetuating the cycle of neglect.

Implications of the Research Gap

The lack of research on mothers and education has significant societal consequences. It limits our understanding of how educational opportunities can empower mothers and improve outcomes for their families. Research shows that educated mothers are more likely to prioritize education for their children, breaking cycles of poverty and inequality (UNICEF, 2019). Addressing the research gap could therefore have a multiplier effect, benefiting not only mothers but also their families and communities.

Conclusion

The literature on mothers returning to education reveals a complex interplay of psychological, emotional, social, and economic factors that influence their decisions and experiences. This chapter explored the multifaceted experiences of mothers returning to education, showing how their identities as mothers intersect with emotional, social, and economic factors. Motivations such as personal growth, role modelling, and financial stability are often counterbalanced by structural barriers like gendered expectations, lack of childcare, and limited institutional support. Understanding these overlapping dynamics is key to addressing the real needs of mothers pursuing education.

The next chapter outlines the methodological approach used to explore these dynamics in greater detail through empirical research.

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to investigate the experiences, opportunities, and challenges faced by mothers returning to education in Malta. A robust and well-structured methodological framework was essential to ensure the study produced credible and relevant findings. The chapter presents the research design, data collection methods, and procedures implemented throughout the study. It includes an explanation of the sampling strategy and recruitment process, aimed at achieving a diverse representation of mothers from various educational institutions and life circumstances.

Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, informed consent, and participant protection, are also addressed to uphold research integrity and adhere to established ethical guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2020). The chapter further explains the data analysis process, specifically the use of thematic analysis, to demonstrate how insights were systematically derived from participants' narratives.

Qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured interviews, facilitated an in-depth exploration of personal experiences, allowing for the identification of key themes related to educational barriers, support systems, and strategies for balancing academic and caregiving responsibilities (Silverman, 2020). This approach reflects the study's commitment to capturing the complexity of participants' lived realities while producing findings that are both trustworthy and relevant to informing policy and practice.

Philosophical foundations: Epistemology and Ontology

The ontological and epistemological foundations of this research are closely aligned with social constructionism and feminist theory. Ontology, which concerns the nature of reality and what constitutes the social world, plays a central role in this study. It involves examining assumptions about the existence and structure of gender relations and societal norms (Hyde & Lindberg, 2014). In this context, ontology helps to explore how dominant cultural narratives, and social structures shape the experiences of mothers in education. Societal expectations surrounding motherhood often impose constraints on women's ability to pursue personal development opportunities such as higher education, which may manifest as internalised beliefs, stigma, or external structural barriers.

Feminist ontology challenges the notion that gender relations are natural or fixed, instead viewing them as socially constructed and historically contingent. These constructions influence the roles and responsibilities assigned to women and men, often positioning mothers within rigid caregiving expectations (O'Reilly, 2010). This research therefore adopts a social constructionist ontology informed by feminist theory, positing that the realities of motherhood, gender, and education are not inherent truths but are continually shaped, maintained, and resisted through social and cultural processes. Understanding these foundations is essential for examining how gendered expectations influence the motivations, challenges, and aspirations of mothers returning to education.

Epistemology, which addresses the nature and production of knowledge, is similarly shaped by feminist thought. This research aligns with feminist epistemology, which critiques dominant knowledge systems for marginalising women's experiences and privileging patriarchal perspectives (Haraway, 1988). Drawing on Haraway's (1988) concept of 'situated knowledges', the study recognises that all knowledge is partial and context bound. By centring the voices of mothers, the research does not aim to produce a singular truth, but rather seeks to offer rich, contextualised understandings that challenge universal or detached accounts of education and gender.

Standpoint feminist epistemology further reinforces this approach by emphasising the epistemic authority of marginalised groups. It argues that women, by virtue of their social positioning, possess insights that can expose dimensions of social life often obscured from more privileged perspectives (Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983; Collins, 2000). Rather than aiming for objectivity, standpoint theory values the knowledge that emerges from lived experience, particularly when it challenges dominant narratives and structures of power.

Social constructionism also underpins the study's epistemological stance by asserting that knowledge is produced through interaction and shared meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). This lens emphasises the influence of social and cultural context on what is known and how it is understood. For instance, in societies that place a high value on education, mothers may view returning to study as a form of empowerment and a means of improving their family's future. This co-constructed understanding of knowledge aligns with feminist commitments to valuing experience and social location, highlighting how individual meaning is shaped by broader cultural and institutional forces.

These ontological and epistemological foundations naturally led the study towards a qualitative phenomenological approach. Rooted in the belief that reality is multiple and constructed through lived experience, the research adopted a constructivist perspective, viewing knowledge as co-created through the researcher–participant relationship. This philosophical orientation recognises the complexity of human experience and favours deep, interpretive engagement over objective measurement. Consequently, a qualitative phenomenological methodology was chosen to explore the richness of participants’ narratives in a way that is both descriptive and interpretive.

This philosophical stance informed the design of the study, as detailed in the methodology chapter. The primary method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to express their experiences in their own words, aligning with the principles of phenomenological research. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, reflecting the epistemological view that themes are not simply discovered but are actively constructed through the researcher’s analytical engagement. Each stage of the research process—from recruitment to analysis—was grounded in the belief that meaning is shaped through lived, contextualised experience. Thus, the ontological and epistemological foundations were not abstract considerations but served as a coherent framework guiding both the theoretical orientation and practical execution of the research.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by mothers returning to education in Malta. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions. Specifically, a phenomenological methodology was deemed appropriate, as it focuses on how individuals interpret and make sense of their personal experiences within a particular social and cultural context (Poth, 2019). By prioritising participants’ subjective realities, phenomenology enables a rich and nuanced exploration of their thoughts, emotions, and perspectives in relation to the topic under investigation. This approach is particularly valuable in studies where the goal is not to generalise findings but to illuminate the essence of a phenomenon through detailed, contextualised descriptions. In the case of this research, it facilitates a deeper understanding of how

mothers experience their return to formal education, including both their internal motivations and the external barriers they encounter. Semi-structured interviews facilitated the collection of rich narratives, allowing participants to convey their experiences freely while enabling the researcher to explore emergent themes..

The data collected were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, a method that involves coding the data to identify recurring patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This process supported the development of key insights into the experiences of mothers navigating educational pathways. In-depth interviews helped reveal specific challenges such as financial pressures, the difficulty of balancing childcare with academic demands, and the experience of stigma or discrimination. At the same time, the qualitative approach also highlighted opportunities mothers identified through their educational journeys, including access to improved career prospects, skill development, and personal growth.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

This study utilized a purposive sampling approach to select participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the research question (Patton, 2015). In this case, participants were mothers who were either currently engaged in or had completed a return to formal education. This focus aligned with the study's objective: to explore the experiences, challenges, and motivations of mothers navigating education while balancing other life responsibilities. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to gather targeted insights that may not have been accessible through random sampling methods and is especially appropriate in qualitative research, where the aim is to explore phenomena in depth rather than to generalize findings (Poth, 2019).

To complement this approach, snowball sampling was used for participant recruitment. Snowball sampling involves asking initial participants or contacts to refer others who meet the study's inclusion criteria (Goodman, 2011). This method was particularly effective in reaching mothers who may be underrepresented or difficult to access through formal recruitment channels. Given the time constraints and limited visibility of this demographic, snowball sampling proved a practical and efficient method for building the sample. Recruitment was conducted primarily through social media platforms, particularly Facebook, which enabled broad and rapid dissemination of information. A post outlining the study's purpose, eligibility criteria, and participation details was shared, and responses

were received shortly thereafter. Initially, I was concerned about potential recruitment difficulties. However, it quickly became evident that mothers who had returned to education were both eager to share their experiences and viewed the topic as important and underexplored. Many expressed a desire to contribute to research that acknowledges the realities of balancing motherhood and education. Previous research supports the effectiveness of social media in qualitative participant recruitment, particularly when targeting specific groups (Paulus, Lester, & Dempster, 2014).

The use of digital platforms also helped overcome logistical challenges such as geographic dispersion and limited access to in-person networks. Moreover, it aligned with the communication habits of many modern mothers, who frequently engage with online communities for support and information (Madge & O'Connor, 2005). Recruitment materials clearly stated the voluntary nature of participation, assured confidentiality, and highlighted the potential value of sharing personal experiences.

The study aimed for a sample size of 6 to 8 participants; I was fortunate to have nine participants. In qualitative research, especially when using in-depth interviews, smaller samples are appropriate and often necessary for achieving depth. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) propose that data saturation—when no new information or themes are observed—can be achieved with as few as six participants, depending on the level of group homogeneity and the complexity of the subject matter.

Saturation served as a guiding principle in this study to ensure both completeness and focus on data collection (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

A smaller sample also enabled deeper engagement with each participant's narrative, which was essential for exploring the complex and multifaceted experiences of mothers in education. It facilitated the development of trust and rapport, encouraging more open and honest discussions (Seidman, 2006). Additionally, the smaller dataset allowed for manageable and rigorous qualitative data analysis, particularly through iterative coding and thematic development (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Practical considerations also influenced the sample size. Conducting, transcribing, and analysing in-depth interviews is time-intensive, and a limited sample allowed the researcher to maintain quality and depth without being overwhelmed. This approach supported the study's commitment to prioritising depth over breadth in understanding participant experiences.

To ensure the relevance and richness of the data, specific inclusion criteria were established. Participants had to be mothers who were currently engaged in or had recently returned to formal education—defined here as structured learning within an educational institution such as a university, college, or vocational training centre. This criterion ensured alignment between participants’ experiences and the study’s aims.

The rationale for this selection was twofold. First, it enabled an exploration of the unique challenges and opportunities mothers encounter in educational settings, including time pressures, financial strain, and societal expectations related to caregiving (Hinton-Smith, 2016). Second, the study aimed to identify strategies and resources that support educational success. Mothers who had recently navigated this path were well-positioned to reflect on both the barriers they faced and the ways they overcame them (Palinkas et al., 2005).

The combination of purposive sampling and well-defined inclusion criteria enhanced the relevance and quality of the data. Participants brought rich, experience-based insights that contributed to a deeper understanding of the research questions. As Palinkas et al. (2015) emphasize, purposive sampling is particularly valuable when seeking the perspectives of individuals with specialised knowledge or lived experience central to the study’s focus.

Method of Data Collection

Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing flexibility to explore participants’ stories in detail while ensuring that key topics are covered. A semi-structured interview format strikes a balance between having a pre-defined structure and allowing space for spontaneous insights, which is crucial for qualitative research that seeks to understand personal experiences and perceptions. Kvale (2007) emphasized that this approach helps in capturing both anticipated and emergent themes, as participants are not constrained by rigid questioning. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in social research because they offer the adaptability needed to pursue unexpected but relevant avenues of inquiry while still addressing core research objectives.

Flexibility within this method is a significant advantage. The interviews are structured around an interview guide but allow for deviations based on participants' responses. This structure ensures that the research remains focused on the primary themes of inquiry while encouraging participants to share their unique perspectives. As a result, unanticipated

themes may emerge, which can provide fresh insights or highlight critical areas that may not have been considered in the study's initial design. Flexibility enhances the richness and complexity of the data, as participants are more likely to speak freely and reflect on their experiences without feeling restricted by rigid questioning (Foley et al., 2021).

The interview guide (Appendix) includes open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' educational journeys. These questions aim to encourage participants to share both descriptive and reflective accounts of their experiences. By using open-ended questions, I was able to gather comprehensive data on various aspects of the participants' experiences, including their support systems, the barriers they encountered, and their personal reflections on overcoming those challenges. Open-ended questions are a fundamental tool in qualitative research because they enable participants to express themselves in their own words, leading to authentic and in-depth responses. As noted by Patton (2015), the richness of qualitative data often stems from the ability of participants to narrate their stories without the constraints of predefined response options.

In addition to focusing on the content of the questions, the interview guide was also designed to facilitate a conversational flow. Building rapport with participants is essential to encourage openness and trust. When participants feel comfortable, they are more likely to provide candid and meaningful responses.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted in a setting that was comfortable and convenient for the participant. Providing a conducive environment is crucial for facilitating open and honest dialogue, as participants are more likely to feel at ease when they are in a familiar or comfortable space. According to Seidman (2006), the physical or virtual setting of an interview can significantly influence the quality of the data collected. When participants feel relaxed and secure, they are more likely to engage deeply with the questions and provide rich, detailed responses. For this reason, interviews were conducted in person, in a location of the participant's choosing.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns within the data. This method was well-suited to the qualitative nature of the study, as it allowed for a detailed and nuanced exploration of the participants' lived experiences. Belotto (2018) described reflexive thematic analysis as a multi-stage process involving familiarization

with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and finally, defining and naming them. Each stage was iterative and required continuous reflection, with the researcher engaging deeply with the data and critically examining their interpretations throughout the process.

The first stage involved familiarization with the data. This included reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to develop a thorough understanding of the content. Preliminary notes were taken to document initial impressions, emerging ideas, and areas of potential interest. This immersion in the data was essential for identifying patterns and preparing for the subsequent stages of analysis.

In the next stage, initial codes were generated. Coding involved systematically organizing the data into meaningful units that reflected recurring ideas or concepts. These codes were both descriptive—capturing explicit content—and interpretive—highlighting underlying meanings and contextual nuances. As Braun and Clarke (2012) explained, coding is a foundational step in thematic analysis, providing a framework to manage and interpret complex qualitative data. The initial codes were then reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and alignment with the research questions.

Following coding, related codes were grouped together to identify potential themes. Themes represented broader patterns of meaning that captured significant insights across the dataset. This phase involved analysing the relationships between codes and how they connected to the study's objectives. Themes reflected both shared experiences among participants and individual perspectives that added depth to the findings.

Once themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined to ensure they were coherent, meaningful, and firmly grounded in the data. This process included revisiting the coded extracts to verify that each theme accurately reflected participants' narratives. Themes were also compared across participants to identify both commonalities and differences. This step was crucial for ensuring that the themes provided a comprehensive and trustworthy representation of the data.

The final stage involved defining and naming the themes. At this point, the core of each theme was clearly articulated, and detailed descriptions were developed, supported by illustrative excerpts from participants' accounts. These final themes formed the basis for presenting the study's findings and demonstrated how participants' experiences related to the central research questions.

Limitations and strengths of the study

Limitations

The small, purposive sample size limits the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of mothers returning to education. The experiences shared by participants may not fully represent those of all mothers in similar circumstances (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Additionally, due to the qualitative nature of the study, the findings are shaped by the researcher's interpretation and are therefore subject to potential bias.

Given the study's constructivist and interpretivist foundations, objectivity was not a primary aim. Instead, the research embraced subjectivity and reflexivity as essential for understanding the participants' lived experiences. From this epistemological and ontological standpoint, knowledge is viewed as co-constructed and context-dependent, rather than as an objective truth. While this approach offers rich, in-depth insights, it also presents inherent limitations.

A key challenge was the difficulty in recruiting a more diverse sample. Despite efforts to reach a broad demographic through social media and snowball sampling, the final participant group lacked representation from certain segments, such as single mothers, mothers from minority ethnic backgrounds, and those experiencing significant financial hardship. These voices could have added valuable dimensions to the data. Furthermore, as participation was voluntary, those who chose to engage may have had particularly strong or reflective views, or more time and willingness to share their experiences. In contrast, those who might have faced more intense challenges may not have had the resources or inclination to participate.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the study but do affect its scope and transferability. Rather than attempting to eliminate bias, this research acknowledged and actively engaged with it through continuous reflexivity and transparent reporting.

Conducting and analysing in-depth interviews was also time-consuming and resource intensive. The processes of transcription, coding, and thematic analysis required significant effort and necessarily constrained the scale of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Moreover, while the diversity among participants enriched the data, it also introduced complexity to the analysis. Synthesising a wide range of individual experiences into coherent themes was challenging, as variation in context, background, and personal

circumstance required careful interpretation (Palinkas et al., 2015). Nonetheless, this diversity also served as a strength, offering a more holistic and layered understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Strengths

The rich and detailed data enabled an in-depth examination of the personal experiences, challenges, and motivations of mothers re-entering education. This method provided nuanced insights that may have been overlooked by quantitative approaches (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018). Capturing personal narratives illuminated both individual and contextual factors shaping mothers' educational journeys, offering a holistic view of their experiences. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed on follow up of unexpected but relevant topics as they emerged, thereby enhancing the depth and quality of the data (Smith, 2022).

The qualitative approach prioritised participants' voices, allowing them to articulate their experiences in their own words. By foregrounding their experiences, the study aligned with feminist research aims of highlighting gendered inequalities and promoting empowerment (Harding, 1991). Moreover, qualitative methods were particularly well-suited for examining how cultural, social, and institutional contexts influenced these women's educational pathways. This contextual understanding was essential for identifying and addressing systemic barriers (Burr, 1998).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical principles set out by the University of Malta (UoM).

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research study.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection began. As part of the consent process, participants received a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and data protection. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without providing a reason or facing any negative consequences. Participants

were encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification prior to signing the consent form (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

To safeguard participants' identities, all data were anonymised by removing or coding any personally identifiable information. Anonymisation involved assigning pseudonyms and securely storing raw data to prevent unauthorised access (Babbie, 2020). Any data presented in the final report was carefully reviewed to ensure that no identifying details were disclosed, thereby maintaining participant privacy throughout the study (Saunders et al., 2015).

Confidentiality was further maintained through the implementation of strict data protection protocols, in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and UoM's ethical guidelines. These protocols included limiting data access and storing all files on encrypted, password-protected systems.

Participants were regularly reminded of their autonomy, including their right to voluntary participation and withdrawal at any point. This aligns with the ethical principle of respect for autonomy, which highlights the importance of informed, voluntary decision-making (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019).

Interviews were conducted with empathy, respect, and sensitivity, consistent with best practices in ethical qualitative research (Tracy, 2010).

These ethical measures were implemented to protect participants' rights and dignity and to foster trust between the researcher and participants. By emphasising informed consent, confidentiality, and autonomy, the study aimed to uphold the highest standards of ethical research practice.

Reflexivity was a central element of the research, following Creswell (2013) and Patton (2015), involving ongoing reflection on the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and their influence on data collection and interpretation. Recent scholars such as Nowell et al. (2017) and Tracy (2010) have emphasised the importance of methodological clarity and ethical integrity in qualitative research—principles that were consistently upheld throughout this study.

This chapter outlined the study's methodological framework, rooted in a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used to examine

the lived experiences of mothers returning to education, with purposive and snowball sampling employed for participant recruitment. Ethical principles—such as informed consent, confidentiality, and reflexivity—were integral throughout. By upholding trustworthiness, transparency, and rigour, the study sought to generate meaningful insights grounded in the participants' lived realities. The next chapter presents the thematic findings, highlighting key experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of the lived experiences of mothers returning to higher education, based on in-depth interviews with multiple participants. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis, narratives were coded inductively and later organised into six major themes that reflect the gendered, emotional, institutional, and relational dimensions of this journey. These themes do not emerge in isolation; rather, they intersect to offer a nuanced portrait of how caregiving women negotiate education, identity, and structural barriers.

Returning to education as a mature student is a complex, multifaceted journey influenced by personal motivations, external support systems, and structural challenges. The sections below explore nine participants' experiences across several key dimensions: motivation, support such as familial and institutional, emotional and psychological strain, time management, career aspirations, financial considerations, impacts on family life, and recommendations for policymakers. The findings provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of mature learners, particularly women balancing education with caregiving and employment.

Participant Profile

The final sample consisted of nine participants, all of whom were working professionals pursuing further education while also managing parenting responsibilities. The participants ranged in age from their 30s to 50s and had between one and three children. This diverse group provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of working parents who are also students. The table below offers an overview of each participant's demographic profile, including their name (pseudonym), age range, number of children, occupation, and their dual roles as parents and students.

Name	Age	Children	Occupation	Roles
Rosa	Late 30s	1	professional	Working parent, student
Sofia	Early 40s	2	professional	Working parent, student
Frida	In her 30s	2	professional	Working parent, student
Simone	Early 40s	1	professional	Working parent, student
Maya	Early 50s	2	professional	Working parent, student
Agatha	In her 30s	2	professional	Working parent, student
Ramona	Early 50s	2	professional	Working parent, student
Helena	In her 30s	1	professional	Working parent, student
Natalie	In her 40s	3	professional	Working parent, student

While a rich range of recurrent themes emerged from the participant interviews (See Appendix1), this chapter focuses on six themes that were determined to be of analytical significance. These themes were selected due to their prominence across multiple narratives, their conceptual richness, and their direct relevance to the central research questions. Although other insights surfaced throughout the data, the six themes explored herein offer the most compelling lens through which to examine the complex interplay of caregiving, identity, institutional structures, and educational aspiration. Their selection enables a focused and in-depth analysis aligned with the study’s theoretical and methodological framework.

Motivations for Returning to Education

The decision to return to education was deeply meaningful for participants, driven by a constellation of personal, familial, and economic factors. Across the narratives of Rosa, Frida, Ramona, Maya, Simone, and Natalie, four interconnected motivational strands emerged: the desire to act as role models for their children, to reclaim suppressed or postponed identities, to attain economic independence, and to seek personal growth and fulfilment.

Participants identified their return to education as a deliberate act of intergenerational transformation. Education was framed not only as personal development but as a legacy for their children — a message about perseverance, possibility, and the value of learning.

Across diverse narratives, motivations for returning to education were grounded in deeply personal, relational, and political logics. Whether framed as role modelling, self-restoration, financial autonomy, or personal meaning, each woman's decision was both an individual act and a collective gesture — a move toward reclaiming voice, agency, and space in systems not built for caregiving mothers. This thematic lens reveals that returning to education is far more than a career strategy; it is a feminist act of resistance, renewal, and hope.

Rosa articulated the importance of educational role modeling, stating, "I wanted... for him to have a role model... what it means to sort of have the education that you really wish for." Similarly, Agatha highlighted the motivational impact of maternal persistence: "The fact that their mother continued to study... I think it would act as motivation for them not to give up." Ramona extended this idea to a broader societal context, noting that "it sets a good example to their own children and their network... when you see a mother who has the guts to return to education, it inspires others."

Such reflections resonate with feminist theories that understand mothering as pedagogical, where women consciously use their experiences to shape the social and intellectual futures of the next generation (Luttrell, 1997).

Beyond pragmatic goals, many women described returning to education as a reclaiming of self — an act of personal restoration after years of prioritizing caregiving or conforming to externally imposed roles.

Maya reflected on this internal shift, stating that "something was lacking... this course was really for me," highlighting how the learning experience addressed a previously unmet need. Similarly, Natalie described education as a source of fulfilment, noting, "I wanted to do something that really fulfilled me... something that gave me meaning." For Simone, the experience went beyond fulfilment to a redefinition of self: despite initially fearing academic challenges, she explained, "a dissertation was my biggest fear... but I learned that when there's a problem, you break it into pieces." Her words illustrate how educational engagement fostered resilience and a new self-perception.

These narratives support the view that adult education can serve as a site for identity reconstruction, especially for women whose earlier ambitions were deferred due to social or familial obligations (McLeod & Yates, 2006).

For some participants, education was not solely a vehicle for personal development but a deliberate strategy for achieving economic independence and breaking cycles of dependency. Ramona and Frida emphasized pragmatic motivations rooted in financial autonomy. Frida described her decision as grounded in flexibility and foresight: "I wanted something I could do independently... at my own time and according to my own schedule, especially considering that I was becoming a mother." Her words illustrate the intersection of motherhood and economic strategy, where education served both personal and practical needs.

Ramona was more direct in articulating education as a means of financial empowerment, asserting, "you can stand on your own two feet... not out of need, but out of want." This reflects a conscious reframing of education as a form of agency, where financial independence is not only necessary but desired. Simone also connected her educational return to career advancement, noting, "I noticed that at work I was capable... but I didn't have the educational certificate that I could list on my CV." Her reflection underscores the structural barriers women face in the workforce without formal credentials, even when competence is evident.

These narratives echo feminist economic theories that conceptualize education as a critical lever for structural mobility and self-sufficiency among women (Fraser, 2007). In this context, education becomes more than a personal achievement—it is a form of resistance to economic vulnerability and social constraint.

Several participants framed their return to education as a quest to (re)discover purpose after years in roles that felt stifling or mechanical. Natalie exemplified this tension when she recalled accepting a stable position in finance because "it was the logical next step... but not because I had any particular passion for it." Her subsequent decision to re-enter formal study became, in her own words, an act of liberation that transcended career calculus: "If we're looking towards the future of the country, wouldn't it make sense to invest in people?" Natalie's rhetorical question signals a shift from individual advancement to a broader, civic-minded vision of learning.

Maya echoed this theme of intellectual renewal. Reflecting on her studies after motherhood, she remarked, “It was the best thing that I did after having the children.” Her statement highlights how education can reignite curiosity and affirm identity beyond caregiving roles. Together, these accounts challenge narrowly instrumental views of education as merely a conduit to employment; instead, they position learning as a space for existential inquiry, creativity, and self-reconnection. This perspective aligns with transformative learning theory, which argues that adult education can prompt critical reflection and meaning making (Mezirow, 2000), thereby reshaping both personal trajectories and collective futures.

Challenges and Guilt - the Cost of “Having It All”

While returning to education was often described as empowering, participants also revealed the profound emotional, physical, and cognitive toll of balancing motherhood, academic commitments, and, in many cases, employment. This section explores the intersecting challenges these women faced, centring the themes of maternal guilt, mental and emotional exhaustion, the invisible domestic workload, and the persistent scarcity of time.

The decision to return to education placed participants in a high-stake balancing act between their academic, familial, and emotional responsibilities. Rather than being an empowering journey alone, it was also a site of emotional conflict, physical depletion, and internalized guilt — all intensified by gendered norms and structural expectations. These challenges were not signs of personal failure but reflections of broader societal contradictions, where women are expected to aspire, achieve, and care simultaneously, without compromising any of these roles.

A recurring theme across the interviews was the pervasive sense of guilt many participants experienced when devoting time to their education instead of caregiving. This emotional conflict was shaped by dominant cultural narratives around “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996), which position the “good mother” as one who places her children’s needs above all else. For many women, returning to education meant transgressing these expectations—often quietly, and with internal struggle.

Rosa articulated this tension vividly: “He would end up coming to university with me... I could have taken him to the swings or to a day by the pool.” Her words suggest an ongoing

negotiation between personal ambition and maternal duty. Agatha shared a similar experience, admitting, “There are times when you feel guilty... maybe instead of doing an assignment, I should be at the playground.” These reflections demonstrate how educational engagement, while empowering, is accompanied by a heavy emotional toll.

Helena was especially candid: “Guilt was the most prominent factor... I felt that they were more important.” Her statement highlights the deep psychological impact of deviating from traditional caregiving roles. This form of emotional labour—intangible yet intense—often remained invisible to others but shaped the women’s educational experiences in profound ways. Ultimately, these narratives reveal that the return to education is not only a logistical or academic undertaking, but also a psychologically fraught act of identity renegotiation within entrenched gender norms.

Beyond feelings of guilt, many participants described acute burnout that arose from simultaneously meeting academic deadlines, caregiving demands, and employment responsibilities. Their narratives expose the embodied cost of the cultural “super-woman” ideal (Hochschild & Machung, 1989), in which women are expected to excel at home, at work, and in study without visible strain.

Natalie’s recollection was stark: “That time broke me... if I knew before what I was going in for, I definitely would not have done it.” Here, the language of “breaking” underscores how chronic overload can reach a breaking point rather than a manageable equilibrium. Frida’s experience while still in the maternity ward adds a temporal dimension to this precarity: “While I was in the maternity ward, I was worrying because I had to submit the last two assignments... time which I will never get.” Her reflection reveals how the postpartum period—typically framed as recovery—was re-colonised by academic obligations, leaving no space for rest.

Sofia broadened the critique, pointing to the impossibility of compartmentalising roles: “You cannot fraction the person... we are expected to parent like we don’t have a job and study like we have no other responsibilities.” This statement captures the structural contradiction women face: each sphere demands total commitment, yet none acknowledges the others. Collectively, these accounts highlight that the emotional labour identified earlier is accompanied by real physical and psychological depletion. Burnout, therefore, is not merely an individual weakness but a predictable outcome of conflicting social

expectations that render women's labour—paid, domestic, and academic—simultaneously indispensable and invisible.

In addition to the visible demands of academic work and caregiving, participants consistently described the unrelenting mental load they carried—an often-invisible layer of cognitive labour involved in managing household logistics, emotional needs, and daily routines. This “thinking work,” as Daminger (2019) defines it, includes anticipating needs, planning meals, managing schedules, and problem-solving—tasks that remain largely unacknowledged yet are essential to the smooth functioning of family life.

Maya captured this invisible burden succinctly: “No one thought about dinner... they expected me to think about it.” Her comment underscores the default assumption that women are responsible not only for doing but for thinking about what needs doing. Rosa named the phenomenon explicitly: “To keep a house running, to keep a family running... that mental load.” The repetition in her phrasing signals the relentlessness and breadth of this hidden work. Natalie illustrated the cumulative effect: “We would get home all together, finding the house as we had left it in the morning... then it would be a rush to get food on the table.” The lack of shared responsibility transformed even routine tasks into a source of evening stress.

Together, these accounts reinforce Daminger's (2019) argument that cognitive labour is gendered and structurally embedded. Despite their roles as students and professionals, participants were still expected to carry the mental architecture of home life. This constant cognitive engagement—unrewarded and unrelieved—adds to the emotional and physical toll of “doing it all,” revealing how deeply gendered expectations persist even in ostensibly egalitarian households.

For most participants, time emerged as their most scarce and precious resource. The daily balancing act of study, work, and caregiving required constant trade-offs—often at the expense of rest, leisure, and personal well-being. This chronic time poverty, as described by Hochschild and Machung (1989), reflects a broader societal expectation that women will seamlessly absorb additional roles without corresponding structural support or institutional flexibility.

Helena captured the emotional weight of these trade-offs: “Time, it was the most difficult... I didn't want to miss certain milestones.” Her words reflect the deep tension between

pursuing personal growth and being present for family moments she deemed irreplaceable. Simone described the highly structured routines she created to manage competing demands: “I had to prepare a menu and stick to it... I had to calculate everything so it could fit in the routine.” Her language reveals the intense mental discipline required to make space for educational goals within an already saturated schedule.

Ramona, with raw honesty, laid bare the consequences of this juggling act: “Time is very limited... You take away from something to give to something else. If you look at my house, it's like a pigsty. But I've given up. You can't do it all.” Her reflection powerfully resists the myth of effortless multitasking and underscores the emotional cost of attempting to meet impossible standards across multiple domains.

Together, these narratives illustrate how time poverty is not a result of poor planning or lack of motivation, but a systemic issue rooted in gendered assumptions about care, productivity, and sacrifice. Despite their determination, the women’s stories reflect the profound exhaustion and continual compromise required to “do it all” in a system that offers little accommodation for their realities.

Support Systems

While institutional structures often failed to accommodate caregiving mothers, participants consistently pointed to informal support networks — partners, family members, peers, and especially other women — as critical to their educational persistence. This section explores how these support systems operated emotionally, practically, and politically, often embodying a feminist ethic of care and solidarity.

This section demonstrates that support systems — particularly those grounded in feminine solidarity and intergenerational care — were indispensable in enabling mothers to navigate academic life. Far from being ancillary, these informal networks were often more dependable and empathetic than institutional supports. They offered emotional strength, practical relief, and a sense of belonging in a system that too often treated caregiving women as invisible. As such, these stories are not only about support — they are about resistance, collective wisdom, and the radical potential of care.

Participants consistently emphasized the indispensable role of family and close friends in enabling their educational journeys. These support systems were not simply helpful add-ons—they were structural lifelines. Without them, many women suggested they would not

have been able to continue their studies at all. This reflects Tronto's (1998) concept of distributed care, wherein caregiving is shared across a network—often disproportionately among women—to support the flourishing of others.

Frida underscored her dependence on intergenerational care: “I had to leave my children a lot under my parents’ care.” Her reliance on her parents was not optional but essential—a redistribution of caregiving labour to make space for academic engagement. Helena described a similar dynamic, noting how both her husband and mother provided vital practical support: “My husband... used to take care of our sons... My mother... prepared me dishes.” Her account illustrates how care was shared across generations and within her immediate household.

Simone pointed to the emotional dimensions of this support, crediting her sister for psychological resilience during difficult moments: “Every time I felt overwhelmed, my sister helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel.” In this way, care was not only logistical but also deeply emotional—anchoring participants amid stress and self-doubt.

These narratives reveal how women's capacity to pursue education was often contingent on a web of relational care, much of which remained informal and gendered. While distributed care made academic progress possible, it also highlighted broader structural gaps in institutional support—gaps that were filled not by policy, but by the quiet, everyday labour of loved ones.

Alongside family support, many participants described informal alliances with other student-mothers as vital emotional lifelines. These peer networks operated as self-organised “mutual aid,” countering isolation, self-doubt, and overwhelm. Rosa recalled the collective resilience that emerged in shared spaces of study: “We all had our own baggage, and we used to support each other ... a strong female support system... with support, you can overcome it.” Her words underscore how reciprocity—rather than one-directional help—fostered a sense of collective capability.

Natalie envisioned formalising such networks so future cohorts would not have to improvise: “Someone who's been through it, to explain how it works, what helps, what to look out for.” Her suggestion points to the potential of peer mentoring as an institutional resource rather than an accidental benefit.

These dynamics resonate with feminist theories of relational empowerment (Noddings, 2010), which position care as a reciprocal process that strengthens all parties involved. Shared experience became the basis for emotional resilience and practical survival: by pooling strategies, normalising hardship, and celebrating small victories, student-mothers transformed individual struggle into collective strength. In doing so, they created counter-spaces where the demands of academic life and motherhood could be acknowledged—and actively resisted—through solidarity.

Across participants' accounts, care surfaced not as a charitable, top-down gesture but as a reciprocal strategy for collective survival. This aligns with feminist ethics of care (Tronto, 1993) that foreground mutual responsibility over individual self-sufficiency, challenging neoliberal ideals of autonomy.

Agatha articulated this ethos when advising other student-mothers: "Being able to accept any help offered, that's one of the skills you need to strengthen." Her framing positions receptivity—not stoic independence—as an acquired competence, essential to navigating overlapping roles. Frida echoed this stance, describing care as a means of prioritising what mattered most: "It helped me to balance what was really important... my priority were always the children." For her, accepting and offering support was less a convenience than a prerequisite for maintaining core values amid competing demands.

In these narratives, care is strategic, reciprocal, and political. By pooling resources and acknowledging interdependence, women resisted the cultural script that equates competence with self-reliance. Instead, they enacted a collective model of resilience in which each act of giving or receiving support strengthened the group's capacity to persist in academic spaces historically structured without mothers in mind.

Several participants relied heavily on their own mothers to bridge the care gap while they pursued their studies, illustrating both women's resourcefulness and the systemic shortfall in institutional support. Helena highlighted this intergenerational exchange of labour: "My mother... prepared me dishes." Frida's account echoed the pattern of downward delegation: "I had to leave my children a lot under my parents' care."

Although this familial elasticity enabled participants to continue their education, it also reinforced gendered cycles: grandmothers absorbed the unpaid care work, and the burden of reciprocity remained squarely on women. These narratives therefore expose a tension

between private ingenuity and public failure, underscoring the need for structural reforms rather than continued reliance on intergenerational goodwill.

Institutional Support

While informal support networks often provided crucial aid, most participants encountered significant institutional neglect. Universities and professional programs were frequently described as indifferent — or even hostile — to the complex realities of caregiving students. This section explores how education systems, still built on assumptions of the “unencumbered” learner, create structural obstacles for mothers returning to education. Participants also offered clear critiques and policy suggestions aimed at making education more inclusive, equitable, and humane.

Despite the diversity of institutions and programs represented, participants told a remarkably consistent story: educational systems are not designed for mothers. They are built around outdated assumptions of students as full-time, unencumbered individuals with no competing obligations. While a few women encountered supportive faculty or online formats, most were left to self-navigate inflexible systems, absorb the cost of care, and manage hurdles on their own. Their stories are a call to action — for policy change, for feminist pedagogical redesign, and for a fundamental rethinking of who the “ideal student” really is.

Rosa critiqued this inflexibility directly, highlighting both poor communication and scheduling incompatibility: “Lectures from 5:30 to 7:30... you’re informed either at the last minute or on the day.” She added, “If you're not a full-time student with nothing else on your plate, it's quite difficult,” exposing the exclusionary nature of systems built around a narrow, one-size-fits-all model of participation.

Frida offered an even more jarring account from her international program: “I had food poisoning... they said that if I don’t go the following day, I would be cut off.” Her experience illustrates the punitive consequences of failing to adhere to institutional norms—norms that disregard health, care, and unpredictability as legitimate parts of life.

These experiences exemplify what Lynch (2009) calls “care-less” systems—institutions designed around a disembodied, masculinist model of linear progression, uninterrupted availability, and emotional detachment. Parenting, within such systems, is rendered invisible or incompatible with student identity. The rigidity of these structures does not

simply inconvenience—it systematically excludes, reinforcing inequality by privileging those who can conform to idealised, care-free models of participation.

Participants repeatedly pointed to the absence of formal policies that acknowledged their dual roles as students and caregivers. While some flexibility was occasionally extended, it was often ad hoc, discretionary, and unevenly applied—dependent on the goodwill of individual educators rather than embedded in institutional frameworks. This lack of structural recognition left student-mothers navigating their responsibilities in environments that rendered caregiving invisible and unaccounted for.

Helena's experience reflected this ambiguity: "They gave me time to take breaks... other than that, I don't know." Her uncertainty signals the informal nature of accommodations, which were not guaranteed nor clearly communicated. Sofia identified the deeper cultural logic behind this absence: "We are expected to parent like we don't have a job and study like we have no other responsibilities." Her comment points to the internalised expectation of self-sacrifice, where success is measured by the ability to seamlessly juggle without complaint.

Natalie articulated this exclusion bluntly: "They didn't distinguish between who was a mother and who wasn't... no accommodation, no flexibility." Her frustration underscores a system that treats all students as if they exist in a vacuum, untouched by care responsibilities.

These narratives reinforce the idea that caregiving, while essential and ever-present, is institutionally erased. In the absence of clear policies, the burden of adaptation falls squarely on the shoulders of student-mothers. Rather than reconfiguring systems to reflect diverse student realities, institutions expect individuals to bend themselves around inflexible norms, perpetuating structural inequity under the guise of neutrality.

Several participants moved beyond describing personal struggles to articulating calls for structural reform, positioning their lived experiences as the basis for policy critique and transformation. Their narratives echo the work of feminist policy theorists such as Hankivsky and Jordan-Zachery (2019), who argue that without embedding care as a central principle in policy design, institutions will continue to reproduce exclusion and inequity.

Rosa called for a paradigm shift in how institutions support women navigating multiple roles: "You shouldn't have to choose between your career, your education, or your family."

Her statement rejects the false binary between ambition and caregiving, and points toward a model of education that embraces rather than penalizes complexity.

Frida highlighted the cumulative sacrifices student-mothers make—of time, finances, and presence—and underscored the inaccessibility of many academic programs: “As a mother, you would be sacrificing a lot... time away from the family... finances... and all the educational courses are very, very expensive.” Her critique points to the economic barriers that disproportionately affect women, especially those balancing unpaid care work.

Natalie broadened this critique into a vision of public investment, asking: “If we’re looking towards the future of the country, wouldn’t it make sense to invest in people?” Her comment reframes education as a collective good, rather than a private endeavour, aligning with intersectional feminist calls for inclusive, care-centred public policy.

Together, these women act as advocates as well as narrators. Their insights demand not minor adjustments, but fundamental changes in how educational institutions conceptualize participation, equity, and care—urging a move from individual accommodation to systemic transformation.

A few participants did describe positive experiences with more inclusive learning environments, especially where flexibility was institutionalized — for example, through asynchronous content, online delivery, or small class sizes.

Simone, for example, emphasized the adult-learner orientation of her program, noting that “they offered classes online... and we were in small groups... it helped, because as a mother, you don’t have the mentality of a young person who has fewer responsibilities.” Similarly, Agatha appreciated specific accommodations that supported her caregiving role, stating that “some lectures were asynchronous, so I could watch them after the kids went to bed... that really helped.” These accounts suggest that institutional design choices can significantly shape the experiences of caregiving students. Even small adjustments may influence whether these students succeed or face burnout.

Impact on Family and Children

The participants’ return to education was not experienced in isolation — it reverberated through their families, particularly affecting their relationships with children, partners, and extended kin. This section explores the complex impact of education on family life,

highlighting intergenerational influence, shifting domestic roles, cultural resistance, and emotional tensions. For many, pursuing education was not only a personal act but a transformative one that challenged traditional family expectations and reshaped household dynamics.

For the women in this study, education did not occur apart from family — it was a family-altering event. While some struggled with guilt and domestic overload, many found that their educational efforts inspired their children, disrupted inherited gender norms, and catalysed emotional and structural shifts within the household. Yet these positive changes were hard-won, often accompanied by cultural pushback and the emotional weight of constantly having to justify one's ambition. Their experiences reinforce the idea that maternal education is not just a private journey — it is a generational investment and a social intervention.

Returning to education required significant adjustments within the household. Participants often had to renegotiate their roles as mothers and partners, balancing academic responsibilities with traditional expectations of caregiving and homemaking. Natalie described the strain of managing a shared domestic routine without external support, recalling that “we would get home all together, finding the house as we had left it in the morning... then it would be a rush to get food on the table.” Similarly, Maya reflected on the internal tension between her familial obligations and personal goals: “I had to really organize my time and make good use of it, not to feel guilty that I’m being less of a parent or wife.” These reflections highlight the persistent cultural expectation that women remain the primary emotional and logistical coordinators of family life, even while pursuing educational or professional advancement. Despite the strain, many participants viewed their educational pursuit as beneficial to their children. They positioned themselves as active role models, using their journeys to instil values of resilience, ambition, and lifelong learning. Sofia expressed this desire clearly, stating, “I want to be an example for my children.” Agatha echoed this sentiment, linking her own persistence to her children’s outlook: “The fact that their mother continued to study... I think it would act as motivation for them not to give up.” Ramona expanded this perspective beyond her immediate family, suggesting that “it sets a good example to their own children and their network... when you see a mother who has the guts to return to education, it inspires others.” These narratives reflect a pedagogical model of mothering, in which education becomes both a

legacy and an embodied value system passed on to the next generation (Luttrell, 2000). For many participants, education was not solely a path of individual transformation but a means of disrupting intergenerational cycles of gendered limitation. Their choices were often shaped by childhood experiences of missed opportunities or restrictive gender socialization. Sofia recalled, “I was literally trained to become a good wife,” highlighting how early expectations constrained her aspirations. Maya, in contrast, described her efforts to reshape her children’s understanding of gender dynamics: “I tell my husband, the way you treat me is setting the model for our children.” These narratives affirm education as a generational intervention—a means of rewriting family scripts surrounding gender, ambition, and emotional labour. While immediate family members were often supportive, several participants encountered resistance or judgment from extended family, particularly older relatives who upheld more traditional views of gender roles. Natalie described the lack of encouragement from her mother-in-law, stating, “My mother-in-law didn’t support me... we didn’t really talk about it. It was frowned upon.” Agatha noted a double standard within her household: “When my husband was studying, the family was all for it. But when the mother does it, it’s ‘is food ready?’” These reflections highlight the cultural friction between patriarchal expectations and women’s efforts to redefine their roles through education. The contradiction is not only emotional but structural: women are expected to aspire and serve simultaneously, with little cultural scaffolding for how to navigate both.

Personal Growth and Empowerment

The final theme that emerged across narratives is perhaps the most affirming: education transformed these women. Despite being exhausted, overextended, and systemically unsupported, they emerged with greater clarity, confidence, and conviction. For many, the journey was not just about degrees or jobs — it was about reclaiming dignity, modelling strength, and asserting that motherhood and ambition need not be mutually exclusive. In this sense, the act of returning to education was both personal and political — an intervention into narratives of what women, and especially mothers, are allowed to be.

For all the emotional strain, time poverty, and structural obstacles described in earlier sections, the participants’ return to education was overwhelmingly framed as a journey of personal transformation. Through education, they reclaimed confidence, challenged internalized limitations, and redefined success on their own terms. This section explores

how education served as a catalyst for self-actualization, emotional healing, and feminist resistance, allowing participants to rediscover their voice, purpose, and capacity.

Education was frequently described as a turning point, particularly against a backdrop of prior adversity—burnout, self-doubt, and the long-term emotional consequences of caregiving. Frida acknowledged both the challenge and the payoff, admitting, “I wouldn’t have gone into it had I known what I would be going through... but I wouldn’t change a thing.” She likened her own resilience to that of a teabag, noting that “you only discover its strength in hot water.” Helena shared a similar realization: “I thought I wasn’t resilient... but I really did manage it quite well.” These reflections resonate with transformative learning theory, which posits that personal change often emerges through the struggle to make meaning from hardship (Mezirow, 1991). Several participants spoke of emerging from a sense of invisibility—of regaining confidence in their intellect, their voice, and their ability to influence change. Ramona described this transformation as a form of intellectual validation, stating, “You realize you’re smart... confident of your capabilities... it validates that.” Natalie similarly articulated how surviving the academic process reshaped her self-perception: “If I managed that, I must be able to manage this. It changed my perspective... I am capable if I put my mind to it.” These statements represent more than academic pride; they are acts of feminist reclamation, in which women affirm their right to occupy space, to pursue ambition, and to embrace their full complexity. Many participants resisted dominant, linear narratives of success—those based on productivity, wealth, or conventional career trajectories—and, instead, articulated success in relational, emotional, and explicitly feminist terms such as resilience, integrity, impact, and growth. Maya illustrated this reframing by acknowledging, “It’s okay to feel a bit of guilt in the moment... but I will be a better mother as a result.” Likewise, Frida redefined achievement through her caregiving priorities: “My priority were always the children. That way, it helped me to balance what was really important.” Such redefinitions challenge patriarchal standards and align with feminist epistemologies that privilege lived experience, care, and embodied knowledge over institutional recognition alone (hooks, 1994). For several participants, education served not only as a site of personal healing from invisibility but also as a platform from which to contest structural norms. Ramona framed education as liberatory, asserting that “education gives you awareness... and awareness gives you power... maybe that’s why it’s not encouraged.” Natalie’s view was likewise overtly political: “We don’t want people who rock the boat—we want sheep.” These reflections

position education as a feminist act of resistance, aimed at challenging both personal limitations and the broader systems that sustain inequality. In this sense, learning becomes a tool for survival and subversion alike.

Discussion — Motherhood and Education Through a Feminist Lens

The findings consistently highlight a fundamental misalignment between the realities of caregiving mothers and the structures of higher education. Educational institutions, as described by participants, remain premised on the figure of the "unencumbered student" — someone who can attend rigidly scheduled lectures, meet tight deadlines, and engage in academic life without competing emotional or physical obligations. This aligns with Lynch's (2009) and Tronto's (1998) critiques of institutional structures as inherently "care-less," privileging rationality, autonomy, and linear progression over relational interdependence and care responsibilities.

The women in this study resist these assumptions not through protest alone, but through their continued participation. Their presence in academia, despite inflexible structures, challenges the legitimacy of the unencumbered learner model. Their experiences call for a reframing of what constitutes an "ideal student" — not as someone free from care but as someone managing care with resilience, strategic planning, and emotional labour. This insight aligns with Fraser's (2007) call for educational justice that accounts for both redistribution and recognition.

For many participants, returning to education was not merely a personal ambition but an act of mothering that carried pedagogical intent. The decision to re-enter education was framed as a way to model resilience, perseverance, and intellectual growth to their children. This supports Luttrell's (1997, 2000) framing of mothering as pedagogical, wherein caregiving becomes a method of social and moral instruction.

However, these narratives also politicize mothering. By stepping into academic spaces often designed without them in mind, these women enact a form of resistance to gendered expectations. Hays' (1996) ideology of intensive mothering — that "good mothers" must be ever-present and self-sacrificing — is both internalized and strategically resisted by participants. Their stories show that mothering can be redefined as a public, visible, and intellectually engaged act.

The emotional toll of balancing caregiving, education, and employment emerged as a central and painful reality. Participants described pervasive guilt, exhaustion, and the internalization of impossible standards. These findings mirror Hochschild and Machung's (1989) concept of the "second shift" and extend it into the realm of higher education. Women are not only working and parenting, but also studying, often late at night or during stolen moments of rest.

Despite these challenges, participants consistently articulated how education allowed them to reclaim a sense of agency. Many described the process as transformative, aligning with Mezirow's (1991) theory that adult learning can reshape identities and worldviews. These women spoke of discovering their intellectual strength, reframing their self-worth, and breaking free from narratives of dependency and inadequacy.

Their critiques of institutional rigidity, and their calls for policy change, reflect Hankivsky and Jordan-Zachery's (2019) advocacy for intersectional, care-aware policy reform. These women are not passive recipients of educational services; they are active agents pushing for systems to recognize and accommodate caregiving realities.

Conclusion

The thematic analysis of participant narratives reveals that the return to education for caregiving mothers is neither a linear success story nor a purely personal endeavour — it is a deeply politicized, emotional, and relational act. Across the six core themes examined in this chapter, a complex portrait emerges of women navigating multiple, often conflicting domains: self and society, care and ambition, tradition and transformation.

The next and final chapter will bring the study to a close by summarizing its key findings and reflecting on how they address the initial research objectives. It will also consider the broader implications of the work, acknowledge its limitations, and suggest avenues for future research and provide recommendations for policy and research.

The concluding chapter aims to consolidate the main contributions and provide a final perspective on the significance of the study.

Chapter 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This final chapter summarises the key findings of the study and reflects on its broader implications. It revisits the original research aim—to explore the lived experiences of Maltese mothers returning to formal education—and situates the findings within a feminist and social constructionist framework. The study contributes to an understanding of how personal motivation, institutional structures, and cultural expectations intersect to shape these women's educational journeys and will provide recommendation for policy and research.

Motivations for returning to education were rich and multifaceted — driven by the desire to act as role models, to achieve economic independence, and to reclaim a long-deferred sense of self. These were not instrumental decisions alone, but expressions of feminist agency, intergenerational vision, and self-worth.

In sharp contrast, participants encountered immense challenges, from institutional rigidity to maternal guilt, emotional exhaustion, and time scarcity. These difficulties were not framed as personal failings, but as products of systemic neglect — evidence that higher education remains structured around male-normative, care-less assumptions.

Amid these constraints, women relied on support systems, families, peers, and especially other women to survive and thrive. These networks embodied a feminist ethic of care, serving as counterweights to the isolating and depersonalized structures of formal education.

Yet institutional support was largely absent or inconsistent. Participants called for more inclusive, flexible, and care-aware educational models, advocating not just for themselves, but for future learners whose lives are shaped by caregiving responsibilities.

The impact on family and children was profound: children became both the reason for sacrifice and the source of strength, while family dynamics were reshaped by the redistribution of roles, the modelling of resilience, and the challenging of patriarchal expectations.

This thesis provides a nuanced understanding of Maltese mothers' experiences in education, situated at the intersection of gender, family, and institutional structures. While education offers a route to empowerment, it is navigated within a terrain shaped by cultural norms, economic pressures, and institutional rigidity. These findings confirm that educational inequality is not simply a matter of access but of structural adaptation and cultural recognition.

Contributions of the study

This research makes several significant contributions to the field of educational and feminist studies. First, it amplifies the voices of caregiving mothers in Malta—a demographic frequently marginalized or rendered invisible in both policy discourse and academic research. By foregrounding their lived experiences, the study not only fills a critical gap in the literature but also validates the unique challenges and strengths of these women.

Second, the study offers an innovative integration of feminist theory with practical, policy-oriented insights. It moves beyond abstract theorizing to propose actionable recommendations that can inform educational institutions, social services, and policy makers. This bridging of theory and practice strengthens the relevance and applicability of feminist frameworks in real-world contexts.

Third, the research challenges dominant and often stereotypical narratives surrounding motherhood and education. Rather than portraying caregiving mothers as passive or constrained by their roles, the study highlights their agency, adaptability, and resilience. It brings to light the strategies these women employ to balance caregiving with educational aspirations, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and empowering understanding of maternal identity in academic settings.

Lastly, by situating these findings within the cultural and socio-political context of Malta, the study adds a valuable, localized perspective to global conversations on gender, care, and education. This contextual grounding enhances the study's contribution to comparative education and feminist scholarship.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers important insights into the experiences of caregiving mothers in Malta, it is not without limitations. One key limitation is the socio-economic profile of the participants. The mothers who took part in the research, while balancing caregiving and educational responsibilities, were relatively privileged in terms of access to resources, education, and support systems. As a result, the study does not adequately capture the voices and experiences of mothers from lower-income backgrounds who may face additional barriers, such as financial insecurity, precarious employment, or limited access to childcare.

This exclusion may have led to a partial picture of the caregiving experience, potentially underrepresenting the structural inequalities that disproportionately affect poorer mothers. Their absence limits the generalizability of the findings and calls for further research that includes a broader socio-economic spectrum.

Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, while valuable for capturing depth and nuance, also limits the scope in terms of scale. The findings, therefore, should not be interpreted as representative of all caregiving mothers in Malta, but rather as indicative of specific experiences within a particular demographic.

Future research should aim to address these gaps by incorporating more diverse participant profiles and exploring intersectional factors such as income, ethnicity, and disability, which may further shape the caregiving and educational experiences of mothers.

Recommendations and Reflections

Based on the findings of this study, several practical and policy-oriented recommendations can be made to enhance support for caregiving mothers in higher education:

Expand Access to Affordable and On-Campus Childcare

Higher education institutions should prioritize the provision of accessible and affordable childcare services, ideally located on or near campus. By offering subsidised childcare, universities and colleges can better support student-parents, many of whom face significant

challenges in balancing academic responsibilities with parenting. Scandinavian countries provide effective models for this approach, where institutional childcare is integrated into the educational infrastructure. In these nations, universities offer well-funded, high-quality childcare programs that are not only financially accessible but also operate during hours that align with academic schedules. By adopting similar practices, institutions can create more inclusive learning environments, promote equity, and ensure that parenting does not become a barrier to higher education.

Implement Flexible Academic Policies

To better support a diverse student body, universities should adopt flexible academic policies that accommodate various life circumstances and learning preferences. Offering part-time enrolment allows students who are balancing work, family, or health challenges to continue their education at a manageable pace. Asynchronous learning options, such as recorded lectures and self-paced modules, those with irregular schedules, or those who benefit from reviewing material multiple times. In addition, extended deadlines can reduce stress and support academic success by recognizing that unexpected life events can disrupt study plans. Finally, policies allowing for compassionate leave demonstrate an institution's commitment to student well-being by providing structured support during times of crisis or personal difficulty. These measures collectively promote inclusivity, retention, and academic success, particularly for non-traditional and underrepresented student populations.

Train Academic Staff in Inclusive Practices

It is essential to provide academic staff with continuous and comprehensive professional development focused on inclusivity, particularly in relation to students with caregiving responsibilities. Training should go beyond general awareness and actively equip educators with the skills to recognize and respond to the unique challenges caregiving students face.

This includes developing an understanding of how caregiving can impact academic performance, attendance, and mental health. Staff should be trained to identify signs of burnout or distress specific to this group and respond with empathy and appropriate

support. Recognising caregiving as a legitimate and often invisible identity is key to validating students' experiences and fostering an environment of respect and belonging.

Establish Peer Mentoring and Support Networks

Creating structured peer mentoring and support networks within educational institutions can significantly enhance student well-being and success. These networks foster a sense of belonging and community, which is especially important for students who may feel marginalized, overwhelmed, or isolated — such as first-generation college students, parents, international students, or those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Through shared experiences, students can connect on a personal level, normalize common struggles, and encourage one another through challenges. For instance, mentoring relationships can help new students adjust to campus life, navigate academic expectations, or manage personal responsibilities like work or childcare.

Additionally, informal support mechanisms — such as peer-organized study groups, wellness check-ins, and resource-sharing platforms — create low-barrier opportunities for students to engage with one another. These interactions often lead to increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and better academic outcomes.

To institutionalize these benefits, colleges and universities should integrate peer mentoring and networking opportunities into their orientation programs, student services, and campus life initiatives. Training peer mentors, offering incentives, and creating safe spaces for interaction are key strategies for sustaining these networks long-term. By embedding peer support into the fabric of the student experience, institutions can build a more inclusive, resilient, and empowered student community.

Provide Targeted Financial Assistance

To effectively support student caregivers, it is crucial to implement scholarships and grants specifically designed to address their unique financial challenges. This might include evaluating the number of hours spent on caregiving, the nature of the care provided be that

for a child, elderly relative, or disabled family member, and how these responsibilities impact a student's ability to maintain employment or engage fully in academic life. By incorporating caregiving load as a key eligibility criterion, institutions can more equitably distribute financial support and reduce dropout risk among this vulnerable population. Moreover, consistent funding opportunities can empower student caregivers to remain in school and achieve academic success without sacrificing the quality of care they provide at home.

Recognise Care Work in Institutional Planning

Universities should formally acknowledge caregiving responsibilities—such as caring for children, elderly family members, or relatives with disabilities—as a legitimate and significant aspect of many students' lives. This recognition should be embedded within institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion policies and planning frameworks.

Caregiving often intersects with other marginalized identities and can present substantial barriers to academic participation and success. Institutions should collect data on student carers, provide targeted support services, and integrate their needs into campus planning, timetabling, and resource allocation. Flexible attendance policies, accessible course materials, priority access to childcare services, and dedicated financial or academic support can help level the playing field.

Reconceptualising the Learner Identity

One of the most salient findings of this study is the urgent need to reconceptualise who the "typical" student is. In prevailing academic cultures, particularly in Malta, the ideal learner is imagined as a young, unencumbered individual able to fully devote time and emotional energy to their studies. This vision implicitly excludes caregiving students, especially mothers, whose educational journeys are shaped by competing demands. Redefining student identity to include diverse life circumstances is not merely a gesture of inclusion but a critical step toward educational justice.

This calls for a paradigm shift from viewing caregiving students as needing "special arrangements" to recognising caregiving as a legitimate, complex identity that deserves

systemic accommodation. Institutions must challenge assumptions that position academic rigour and flexibility as mutually exclusive.

The Role of Policy and Advocacy

Policy has a vital role to play in transforming these findings into action. National education strategies should incorporate caregiving students as a distinct demographic with specific needs. Funding bodies can support this shift by offering grants that prioritise inclusive pedagogical innovation or subsidise childcare for student parents. Additionally, frameworks such as gender mainstreaming can ensure that caregiving responsibilities are considered in all aspects of institutional planning.

Advocacy must also extend beyond the academy. Public discourse in Malta around gender and education still tends to frame motherhood and professional ambition in oppositional terms. Media, NGOs, and feminist organisations have an important role in reshaping narratives to celebrate caregiving mothers as active contributors to societal progress. Policy changes, when combined with cultural advocacy, can generate momentum for broader societal transformation.

Cultural Change and the Future of Higher Education

Ultimately, the implications of this research extend beyond improving student retention or satisfaction. They invite a broader reflection on the kind of society higher education seeks to serve. If universities are to remain relevant and socially responsible, they must move beyond meritocratic ideals that ignore structural inequalities. The future of higher education lies in its capacity to adapt—to embrace flexibility, nurture care, and honour the multiplicity of student identities.

In the Maltese context, where traditional family roles remain influential, this adaptation may be especially challenging. Yet, it is also where change can be most meaningful. By supporting mothers who choose to pursue education, institutions signal a commitment to gender equity not only within their own walls but across the wider social fabric.

Future Research

While this study offers insight into the educational experiences of Maltese mothers, several areas warrant further investigation:

Implement comprehensive longitudinal studies to systematically track and analyse the long-term effects of caregiving responsibilities on student caregivers. These studies should examine how caregiving influences academic performance such as graduation rates, and time to degree, professional development including career trajectories, employment stability, and income levels, and personal well-being like mental health, social relationships, and overall life satisfaction. Data should be collected at multiple intervals during their academic careers and into their post-graduation lives — to identify both immediate and evolving challenges and strengths. The findings can guide policy reforms, institutional support systems, and targeted interventions to better accommodate and empower student caregivers throughout their educational and professional journeys.

To enrich the understanding and generalizability of findings, future comparative studies should intentionally include a broader range of participants. This may encompass fathers, whose parenting experiences and perspectives can differ significantly from those of mothers, particularly in terms of caregiving roles and societal expectations. Additionally, including non-caregiving students or individuals who are not directly responsible for caregiving tasks can provide a valuable contrast to caregiving participants, helping to isolate the specific impacts of caregiving responsibilities. Finally, recruiting participants from diverse cultural backgrounds is essential for identifying how cultural norms, values, and support systems influence caregiving experiences and outcomes. Such inclusivity can enhance the cultural sensitivity and relevance of the research, ensuring that findings are not limited to a single demographic or sociocultural context.

Actively involve mothers as key stakeholders in the design, development, and execution of research projects and institutional reforms. This model emphasizes collaborative engagement, where mothers are not merely subjects of study but co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge. Their lived experiences, insights, and priorities shape research questions, methodologies, and outcomes. By fostering equal partnerships between

researchers and mothers, institutions can ensure that reforms are grounded in the realities of those directly affected, leading to more relevant, effective, and sustainable changes. Caregiving is a complex and often undervalued responsibility that impacts individuals differently depending on their social identities and circumstances. When examined through an intersectional lens, it becomes clear that caregiving is not experienced uniformly; rather, it is shaped by factors such as socioeconomic status, race, disability, and marital status. These dimensions interact to create varying levels of privilege or disadvantage, influencing who becomes a caregiver, the resources available to them, and the outcomes of their caregiving experience.

Socioeconomic status plays a significant role in shaping the caregiving experience. Individuals from lower-income backgrounds often face greater burdens as caregivers because they have limited access to supportive workplace policies such as paid leave or flexible schedules. Many low-income caregivers cannot afford formal assistance like home health aides or residential care, forcing them to shoulder the responsibility largely on their own.

Disability introduces another layer of complexity to caregiving. Caregivers may be supporting someone with a disability or may be disabled themselves. In either case, they often face unique challenges navigating fragmented healthcare systems and limited social services. Caregivers of individuals with disabilities frequently encounter bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of guidance, while disabled caregivers may be underestimated or excluded from caregiving support systems due to ableist assumptions.

Marital status also influences caregiving dynamics. Single caregivers—whether never married, divorced, or widowed—often shoulder the entire burden of caregiving on their own, with minimal emotional or practical support. This can lead to significant strain and isolation. In contrast, married individuals may have a partner to assist with caregiving duties, but traditional gender roles often dictate that women take on most of the caregiving work, even when they are also working outside the home. In LGBTQ+ communities, caregiving often involves chosen family members, whose contributions may go unrecognized by legal or institutional frameworks. This lack of recognition can hinder access to crucial resources like family leave or decision-making authority in healthcare settings.

Caregiving must be understood as an intersectional issue that reflects broader social inequalities. Socioeconomic status, race, disability, and marital status each play a role in shaping the caregiving experience, often compounding one another in ways that amplify disadvantage. A nuanced, intersectional approach is essential for developing inclusive policies and practices that genuinely support all caregivers, particularly those who are most marginalized.

Final Thoughts

This thesis began with a simple question: what is it like to be a mother returning to education in Malta? The answer, as it turns out, is anything but simple. It is a story of struggle and strength, exclusion and empowerment, invisibility and recognition. It is a story that reflects broader tensions in how society values care, gender, and knowledge.

The hope is that this research contributes, even in a small way, to the reimagining of education as a space where all learners—regardless of their caregiving roles—can belong, succeed, and flourish. In this vision, care is not a burden to be managed but a resource to be centred. Inclusion is not an afterthought but a guiding principle. And education is not merely a path to individual achievement, but a collective endeavour rooted in justice, empathy, and transformation.

References

Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence Act, In force U.S.C. (2019). Retrieved from <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/581/eng> <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/581/eng>

Abela, A., & Walker, J. (2013). In Abela A., Walker J. (Eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Family Studies: Global Perspectives on Partnerships, Parenting and Support in a Changing World* (1st ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/lib/ummt/detail.action?docID=1443882>

Abela, A. M. (1997). Shifting Family values in Malta: a western European perspective. *Melita Theologica*, 48(2), 21–

41. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/31897?mode=full>

Abela, A. M. (2001). Who Wants Divorce? Marriage Values and Divorce in Malta and Western Europe. *International Review of Sociology*, 11(1), 75–87.

10.1080/03906700020031018

Abid, I., Afaq, K. A., Atif, S., Sana, M., & Saiqa, A. (2020). Role of vocational and technical training in achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls: An empirical study of Sindh, Pakistan. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 211(1), 1019.

10.1051/e3sconf/202021101019

Acker, J. (1992). From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions. *Contemporary Sociology (Washington)*, 21(5), 565–569. 10.2307/2075528

Acker, S., & Armenti, C. (2004). Sleepless in academia. *Gender and Education*, 16(1), 3–24. 10.1080/0954025032000170309

- Adair, L., Fall, C., Hallal, P. C., Martorell, R., Richter, L., & Sachdev, H. S. (2008). Maternal and Child Undernutrition 2: Maternal and child undernutrition: consequences for adult health and human capital. *The Lancet*, 371(9609), 340–357. 10.1016/S0140-6736(07)61692-4
- Advisory, Committee on, Equal, Opportunities for & Women and Men. (2021, 13 September). *Opinion on The care gap in the EU: a holistic and gender-transformative approach*. https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-09/opinion_care_gap_2021_en.pdf. Retrieved 02/02/2025, from https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-09/opinion_care_gap_2021_en.pdf
- Alderman, H., & Headey, D. D. (2017). How Important is Parental Education for Child Nutrition? *World Development*, 94(1), 448–464. 10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.02.007
- Allen, K. R. (2023). Feminist theory, method, and praxis: Toward a critical consciousness for family and close relationship scholars. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 40(3), 899–936. 10.1177/02654075211065779
- American Psychological Association. (2019). Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, (2020). *American Psychological Association*, 428(7th edition), 256. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000165-000>
- Andrea O'Reilly. (2010). Outlaw(ing) motherhood: a theory and politic of maternal empowerment for the twenty-first century [Paper in: Focus on Mothering.]. *Hecate*, 36(1), 17–

29. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/821605693/fulltextPDF/113E0946CF042AFPQ/1?accountid=27934&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>

Ardissone, A. N., Galindo, S., Wysocki, A. F., Triplett, E. W., & Drew, J. C. (2021). The Need for Equitable Scholarship Criteria for Part-Time Students. *Innovative Higher Education*, 46(4), 461–479. 10.1007/s10755-021-09549-7

Arendell, T. (2000). Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 1192–1207. 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01192.x

Astone, N. M., Schoen, R., Ensminger, M., & Rothert, K. (2000). School Re-entry in Early Adulthood: The Case of Inner-City African Americans. *Sociology of Education*, 73(3), 133–154. 10.2307/2673213

Babbie, E. R. (2020). In Babbie E. (Ed.), *The practice of social research* (15th ed.). Cengage

Au. https://pubhtml5.com/enuk/obvy/The_Practice_of_Social_Research_by_Earl_R._Babbie_%28z-lib.org%29/

Baker, M. (2009). Working their Way Out of Poverty? Gendered Employment in Three Welfare States*. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 40(4), 617–634. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/working-their-way-out-poverty-gendered-employment/docview/232582928/se-2?accountid=27934>

Bandura, A. (1995). In Bandura A. (Ed.), *Self-efficacy in changing societies* (1st ed.). Cambridge U.P.

- Barada, V., Cop, B., & Racic, J. (2024). Conceptualizing invisible housework in sociological research: Cognitive, mental or emotional labour. *Sociologija*, 66(2), 245–267. 10.2298/SOC2402245B
- Baraitser, L. (2012). Communality Across Time: Responding to Encounters with Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 13(2), 117–122. 10.1080/15240657.2012.682932
- Baxter, A., & Britton, C. (2001). Risk, identity and change: Becoming a mature student. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 11(1), 87–104. <https://doi-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/10.1080/09620210100200066> Copy citation to clipboard
- Beauvoir, S. d. (2015). In Simons M. A., Timmermann M. (Eds.), *Feminist Writings* (1st ed.). University of Illinois Press. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/lib/ummt/reader.action?docID=3414439&query=&ppg=1>
- Beauvoir, S. d., & Parshley, H. M. (1953). In Parshley H. M. (Ed.), *The second sex* (1st ed.). Cape. <https://newuniversityinexileconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Simone-de-Beauvoir-The-Second-Sex-Jonathan-Cape-1956.pdf>
- Belotto, M. J. (2018). Data Analysis Methods for Qualitative Research: Managing the Challenges of Coding, Interrater Reliability, and Thematic Analysis. *Qualitative Report*, 23(11), 2622–2633. <https://research-ebSCO-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/c/37fd6e/viewer/pdf/jjutuqu2ur>
- Berger, P. L. (1991). In Luckmann T. (Ed.), *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Penguin Books.

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (2023). The social construction of reality. In Berger, P., Luckmann, T. (Ed.), *Social theory re-wired* (3rd ed., pp. 110–122).

Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14647.003.0033>

Bianchi, S. M., Sayer, L. C., Milkie, M. A., & Robinson, J. P. (2012). Housework: Who Did, Does or Will Do It, and How Much Does It Matter? *Social Forces*, 91(1), 55–63.

10.1093/sf/sos120

Blair-Loy, M., Hochschild, A., Pugh, A. J., Williams, J. C., & Hartmann, H. (2015). Stability and transformation in gender, work, and family: insights from the second shift for the next quarter century. *Community, Work & Family*, 18(4), 435–454.

10.1080/13668803.2015.1080664

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Ed.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (1st ed., pp. 57–71). American Psychological

Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Briguglio, L. (2022). Social governance in Southern European EU member states. In M. Brown, & M. Briguglio (Eds.), *Social Welfare Issues in Southern Europe* (1st ed., pp. 32–55). Routledge. 10.4324/9780429262678-4

Brooks, R. (2012). Student-parents and higher education: a cross-national comparison. *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(3), 423–439.

10.1080/02680939.2011.613598

Burns-McCoy, N., Krank, H. M., Bahruth, R. E., Steiner, S. F., & McLaren, P. (2000). The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action: The Ideologies of Gender and Peer Response Sessions Perceived by a Teacher-Researcher. In Steiner, S. F., Krank, H. M., McLaren, P., & Bahruth, R. E. (Ed.), *Freireian Pedagogy, Praxis, and Possibilities: Projects for the New Millennium* (1st ed., pp. 202–222). Routledge.

10.4324/9780203009550-14

Burr, V. (2002). Judging gender from samples of adult handwriting: Accuracy and use of cues. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 142(6), 691–700. 10.1080/00224540209603929

Butler, J. (2002). In Butler J. (Ed.), *Gender trouble* (2nd ed.).

Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203902752>

Butler, J. (2006). In Butler J. (Ed.), *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2013). THE ROAD TO RECOVERY. *Community College Journal*, 84(3), 26–29. <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/road-recovery/docview/1553169799/se-2?accountid=27934>

Cassar Pullicino, Ġ. (1994). In H. Frendo & O. F. (Ed.), *Folklore* (1st ed.). Malta.

Ministry for Youth and the

Arts. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/47513>

Cassar, M. F., Cutajar, J., & Thake, A. M. (2023a). The role of public policy in promoting gender equality in Malta: a diachronic approach. *International Journal of Social Sciences Perspectives*, 12(1), 41-59., 12(1), 41–59. 10.33094/ijssp.v12i1.734

- Cassar, M. F., Cutajar, J., & Thake, A. M. (2023b). The role of public policy in promoting gender equality in Malta: a diachronic approach. *International Journal of Social Sciences Perspectives*, 12(1), 41–59. 10.33094/ijssp. v12i1.734
- Chappell, L. (2006). Comparing Political Institutions: Revealing the Gendered “Logic of Appropriateness”. *Politics & Gender*, 2(2), 223–235. 10.1017/S1743923X06221044
- Cohen, J. R., & Single, L. E. (2001). An Examination of the Perceived Impact of Flexible Work Arrangements on Professional Opportunities in Public Accounting. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 32(4), 317–328. 10.1023/A:1010767521662
- Collins, P. H., & Anderson, M. L. (1995). In Collins, P.H., Anderson, M.L. (Ed.), *Race, class, and gender* (2nd ed.). Wadsworth.
- Connell, R. (2016). Masculinities in global perspective: hegemony, contestation, and changing structures of power. *Theory and Society*, 45(4), 303–318. 10.1007/s11186-016-9275-x
- Correa, S. (1995, (Winter): 28). Women and health--Population and Reproductive Rights: Feminist Perspectives from the South. *WIN News*, 21, 28. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/231094300?accountid=27934&sourcetype=Magazines> <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/women-health-population-reproductive-rights/docview/231094300/se-2?accountid=27934>
- Craig, L., & Mullan, K. (2011). How mothers and fathers share childcare: A cross-national time-use comparison. *American Sociological Review*, 76(6), 834–861. 10.1177/0003122411427673
- Crenshaw, K., & Phillips, A. (1998). In Crenshaw, K., Phillips, A. (Ed.), *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination*

Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

10.1093/oso/9780198782063.003.0016

Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining Validity in Qualitative

Inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 124–130. [https://www-jstor-](https://www-jstor-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/1477543?sid=primo&seq=6)

[org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/1477543?sid=primo&seq=6](https://www-jstor-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/1477543?sid=primo&seq=6)

Daminger, A. (2019). The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor. *American*

Sociological Review, 84(4), 609–633. 10.1177/0003122419859007

Dean, L., Churchill, B., & Ruppanner, L. (2022). The mental load: building a deeper

theoretical understanding of how cognitive and emotional labour overload women and

mothers. *Community, Work & Family*, 25(1), 13–29. 10.1080/13668803.2021.2002813

Deci, L. Edward & Ryan, M. Richard. (2012). Self-determination theory. In *Handbook of*

Theories of Social Psychology. In P. A. Van Lange M., & Kruglanski, Arie, W., &

Higgins, E., Tory (Eds.), *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology* (1st ed., pp. 416–

437). SAGE Publications Ltd. 10.4135/9781446249215

Denord, F., Palme, M., & Réau, B. (2020). In Denord F., & Palme M., & Réau B,

(Eds.), *Researching elites and power: theory, methods, analyses* (1st ed.). Springer Nature.

10.1007/978-3-030-45175-2

Dibben, A., Stabile, I., Gomperts, R., & Kohout, J. (2023). Accessing abortion in a highly

restrictive legal regime: characteristics of women and pregnant people in Malta self-

managing their abortion through online telemedicine. *BMJ Sexual & Reproductive*

Health, 49(3), 176–182. 10.1136/bmjsexrh-2022-201730

Dockery, A. M., & Bawa, S. (2018). Labour Market Implications of Promoting Women's

Participation in STEM in Australia. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 21(2), 125–

152. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/labour-market-implications-promoting-womens/docview/2246219344/se-2?accountid=27934>

Eccles, J. S. (2011). Understanding Educational and Occupational Choices. *Journal of Social Issues*, 67(3), 644–648. 10.1111/j.1540-4560.2011. 01718.x

Edwards, S. (1992). Daughters of Teenage Mothers More Likely to Have a Teenage Birth than Daughters of Older Mothers. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 24(4), 186–

187. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/daughters-teenage-mothers-more-likely-have-birth/docview/224560047/se-2?accountid=27934>

Ennis, L. R. (2014). In Ennis L., R. (Ed.), *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood* (1st ed.). Demeter Press. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/lib/ummt/detail.action?docID=6151413>

European Institute for Gender Equality. (2022). *Malta Gender Equality Index*. eige.europa.eu. Retrieved 16/06/2024, from https://eige.europa.eu/modules/custom/eige_gei/app/content/downloads/factsheets/MT_2023_factsheet.pdf

Falk-Rafael, A. R., Chinn, P. L., Anderson, M. A., Laschinger, H., & Rubotzky, A. M. (2004). The Effectiveness of Feminist Pedagogy in Empowering a Community of Learners: [1]. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 43(3), 107–115. 10.3928/01484834-20040301-08

Federici, S. (2004). In Federici S. (Ed.), *Caliban and the Witch* (1st ed.). Autonomedia. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/silvia-federici-caliban-and-the-witch>

Federici, S. (2014). Notes on Elder-Care Work and the Limits of Marxism. In Marcel van der Linden, and Karl Heinz Roth (Ed.), *Beyond Marx: Theorising the Global Labour*

Relations of the Twenty-First Century (1st ed., pp. 239–250). BRILL.

10.1163/9789004231351_011

Fieck Monica, Miron, A. M., Branscombe, N. R., & Mazurek, R. (2020). “We Stand up for Each Other!” An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Collective Action among U.S. College Women. *Sex Roles*, 83(11-12), 657–674. 10.1007/s11199-020-01144-y

Folbre, N. (2008). Reforming Care. *Politics & Society*, 36(3), 373–387.

10.1177/0032329208320567

Folbre, N., Gornick, J. C., Munzi, T., Connolly, H., & Markus Jäntti. (2014). Women’s Employment, Unpaid Work, and Economic Inequality. In a. M. J. Janet C. Gornick (Ed.), *Income Inequality: Economic Disparities and the Middle Class in Affluent Countries* (1st ed., pp. 234). Stanford University Press.

10.11126/stanford/9780804778244.003.0009

Foley, G., Timonen Virpi, Conlon, C., & O’Dare Catherine Elliott. (2021). Interviewing as a Vehicle for Theoretical Sampling in Grounded Theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20(1), 1–10. 10.1177/1609406920980957

Foucault, M., Ewald, F., Fontana, A., & Gros, F. (2017). In Ewald F. (Ed.), *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan UK. 10.1007/978-1-349-73900-4

Foucault, M., & Carrette, J. R. (2013). Sexuality and power (1978). In R. Carrette Jeremy (Ed.), *Religion and Culture* (1st ed., pp. 115–130).

Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315022857-12/sexuality-power-1978-michel-foucault-jeremy-carrette>

Fraser, N. (2007). Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition: A Two-Dimensional Approach to Gender Justice. *Studies in Social Justice*, 1(1), 23–35. 10.26522/ssj.v1i1.979

Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1408–1416. <https://research-ebsco-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/c/37fd6e/viewer/pdf/zkurleit2z>

Gender Working Group of the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development, & McGregor, B. (1995). Missing Links: Gender Equity in Science and Technology for Development. In B. McGregor (Ed.), *Missing Links: Gender Equity in Science and Technology for Development* (1st ed., pp. 295–307). International Development Research Centre. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/lib/ummt/reader.action?docID=266306&ppg=1>

Gerson, J. M. (1985). Women returning to school: The consequences of multiple roles. *Sex Roles*, 13(1), 77–

92. https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/103230381/bf0028746220230610-1-n44w3z-libre.pdf?1686402896=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DWomen_returning_to_school_The_consequenc.pdf&Expires=1739367244&Signature=a~SQIO0tc1Y-zLop1p1fmmwCk5ixl9P6mrlOETtxj9EekkzpNTVZrI1bYGy4FmHLb1axpP-VOd0Nadw5iVFfd6bT9NGVomCtvXF7z0mWnbW1IHow22bdz6oycZ0JGUG2LzWAZJr-giwnt8lhAX8GQeTVoL8M22ZaLL5BOHXRJXqcK3vEDD6trFgEGKbVLh-rWgih7Ye9gr4DNUBaEYUIrjQhkmG~MB989ORbK5FhfO~fSb4zRqQt07~qRVkDGh3A-tkiCCCBbkgLzt0FIB2vuAGcurPAET4Z2XddOweISHARDIDgggQr6Q5MMUWk~MU~pO3sYHyUr7IPnerY-W7FMsQ__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA

Giddens, A. (1984). In Giddens A. (Ed.), *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration* (1st ed.). University of California Press.

Giddens, A. (2005). In Giddens A. (Ed.), *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age* (1st ed.). Polity. <https://download.e-bookshelf.de/download/0003/8871/07/L-G-0003887107-0002286451.pdf>

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2018). The amazing bounce-backable woman: Resilience and the psychological turn in neoliberalism. *Sociological Research Online*, 23(2), 477–495. 10.1177/1360780418769673

Goodman, L. A. (2011). COMMENT: ON RESPONDENT-DRIVEN SAMPLING AND SNOWBALL SAMPLING IN HARD-TO-REACH POPULATIONS AND SNOWBALL SAMPLING NOT IN HARD-TO-REACH POPULATIONS. *Sociological Methodology*, 41(3), 347–353. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/912208282?parentSessionId=Qzk6zzQ0DkjCxpNO1gfhWNN9kcl9cJAEcfzbfLT%2FmEA%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=27934&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals#>

Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of Conflict Between Work and Family Roles. *The Academy of Management Review*, 10(1), 76–88. 10.5465/amr.1985.4277352

Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson. (2006). How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Sage Journals*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/10.1177/1525822X05279903>

Griffin, D., & Galassi, J. P. (2010). Parent perceptions of barriers to academic success in a rural middle school. *Professional School Counselling*, 14(1), 2156759X1001400109. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2156759X08012002>

[07?casa_token=jLAd_dpZI94AAAAA:QHCriv3qcrwegn69bVrbhsHzzFm13RPCG6Fd93jIbX_wBgU7nRiq7PMMnbO4sEJfKMHnbWOJjKM](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/jasp.12615?casa_token=jLAd_dpZI94AAAAA:QHCriv3qcrwegn69bVrbhsHzzFm13RPCG6Fd93jIbX_wBgU7nRiq7PMMnbO4sEJfKMHnbWOJjKM)

Halper, L. R., Cowgill, C. M., & Rios, K. (2019). Gender bias in caregiving professions: The role of perceived warmth. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 49(9), 549–562. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/jasp.12615?casa_token=PKevOIA4YvQAAAAA%3AiRmj17QK0SUsKlSpQu_gzSP_ZAKGKWh9K1rEafnOUmtTRfX6grN0_I59fEMVjVYdmduDUXe4HkaqRA

Hankivsky, O., & Jordan-Zachery, J. (2019). In Hankivsky, O., Jordan-Zachery, J. (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Intersectionality in Public Policy* (1st ed.). Springer International Publishing. 10.1007/978-3-319-98473-5

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599. 10.2307/3178066

Harding, S. (1992). RETHINKING STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY: WHAT IS "STRONG OBJECTIVITY?". *The Centennial Review*, 36(3), 437–470. retrieved from <https://www-jstor-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/23739232?sid=primo&seq=3>

Harnois, C. E. (2015). Age and Gender Discrimination: Intersecting Inequalities across the Life course. In &. Demos, & T. S. V. M. (Eds.), *At the Centre: Feminism, Social Science and Knowledge* (1st ed., pp. 85–109). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. 10.1108/S1529-212620150000020005

Hawthorne, L. (2001). The globalisation of the nursing workforce: barriers confronting overseas qualified nurses in Australia. *Nursing Inquiry*, 8(4), 213–229. 10.1046/j.1320-7881.2001.00115.x

- Hays, P. A. (1996). Addressing the Complexities of Culture and Gender in Counselling. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 74(4), 332–338. 10.1002/j.1556-6676.1996.tb01876.x
- Healy, K. (2016). A Theory of Human Motivation by Abraham H. Maslow (1942). *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 208(4), 313. 10.1192/bjp.bp.115.179622
- Hill Collins, P. (2009). In Hill C., P. (Ed.), *Another Kind of Public Education: Race, the Media, Schools, and Democratic Possibilities* (2nd ed.). Beacon Press. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/lib/ummt/detail.action?docID=3118052>.
- Hinton-Smith, T. (2016). Negotiating the risk of debt-financed higher education: The experience of lone parent students. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(2), 207–222. 10.1002/berj.3201
- Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3), 551–575. 10.1086/227049
- hooks, b. (2000). In hooks b. (Ed.), *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (1st ed.). Taylor & Francis Group. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/lib/ummt/detail.action?docID=170255>
- Houle, J. N., Staff, J., Mortimer, J. T., Uggen, C., & Blackstone, A. (2011). The Impact of Sexual Harassment on Depressive Symptoms during the Early Occupational Career. *Society and Mental Health*, 1(2), 89–105. 10.1177/2156869311416827
- Houle, J. N., & Warner, C. (2017). Into the red and back to the nest? Student debt, college completion, and returning to the parental home among young adults. *Sociology of*

Education, 90(1), 89–

108. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0038040716685873>

Human Rights Directorate. (2021). *NCPE Annual Report*

2021. <https://humanrights.gov.mt/en/Pages/Gender%20Equality/European%20Affairs/Gender-Pay-Gap-and-Gender-Pay-Transparency.aspx>. Retrieved 16/06/2024,

from <https://humanrights.gov.mt/en/Pages/Gender%20Equality/European%20Affairs/Gender-Pay-Gap-and-Gender-Pay-Transparency.aspx>

Hyde, J., & Lindberg, S. M. (2014). Facts and assumptions about the nature of gender differences and the implications for gender equity. In J. & L. Hyde J. (Ed.), *Handbook for achieving gender equity through education* (2nd ed., pp. 49–62).

Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315759586-10/facts-assumptions-nature-gender-differences-implications-gender-equity-janet-hyde-sara-lindberg>

James, K., Clay-Warner, J., Ammons, S. K., & Kelly, E. L. (2015). The Second Shift and the Nonstandard Shift: How Working Nonstandard Hours Affects the Relationship between the Division of Household Labor and Wives' Fairness Perceptions. In James, K., Clay-Warner, J., Ammons, S.K., Kelly, E., L., (Ed.), *The Second Shift and the Nonstandard Shift: How Working Nonstandard Hours Affects the Relationship between the Division of Household Labor and Wives' Fairness Perceptions* (1st ed., pp. 35–59).

Emerald Group Publishing Limited. 10.1108/S0277-283320150000026002

Jarvis, P. (2010). In Jarvis P. (Ed.), *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: Theory and Practice* (4th ed.). Taylor & Francis Group. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/lib/ummt/reader.action?docID=1099356&ppg=130>

Johnson, R. M., Little, C. W., Shero, J. A., van Dijk, W., Holden, L. R., Daucourt, M. C., Norris, C. U., Ganley, C. M., Taylor, J., & Hart, S. A. (2024). Educational experiences of US children during the 2020–2021 school year in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Developmental Psychology*, 60(7), 1298–1312. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001488>

Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58–71. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197?casa_token=pNNZoB7dVKsAAAAA:aTzZOOb3EOAMi_AdZ461h1zY7-okiGvZOP10Lf2GKZ5N7yKbtZoZBQ3CZ08XJJZ8A-AxQWjmDhEw

Kassama, F. L., & Eschenbacher, S. (2023). Period Poverty -- Fostering Gender Equality through Transformative Learning. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 55(2), 413–426. 10.1080/02660830.2023.2256517

Kvale, S. (2007). In Kvale S. (Ed.), *Learning the Craft of Interviewing* (1st ed.). SAGE Publications, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208963>

Luttrell, W. (2000). "Good enough" Methods for ethnographic research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 70(4), 499–523. 10.17763/haer.70.4.5333230502744141

Lynch, K. D. (2008). Gender roles and the American academe: a case study of graduate student mothers. *Gender and Education*, 20(6), 585–605. 10.1080/09540250802213099

Lynch, K. (2009). Affective Equality: Who cares? *Development (Society for International Development)*, 52(3), 410–415. 10.1057/dev.2009.38

- Madden, M. (2018). Illuminating Low-income Pregnant and Parenting Student Mothers' Experiences with Community College. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 51(3-4), 378–395. 10.1080/10665684.2019.1571463
- Madge, C., & O'Connor, H. (2005). Mothers in the Making? Exploring Liminality in Cyber/Space. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30(1), 83–97. <https://www-jstor-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/3804531?sid=primo&seq=2>
- Mallman, M., & Lee, H. (2017). Isolated learners: Young mature-age students, university culture, and desire for academic sociality. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 36(5), 512–525. <https://www-tandfonline-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/doi/full/10.1080/02601370.2017.1302012>
- McLeod, J., & Yates, L. (2006). In McLeod, J., Yates, L., (Ed.), *Making Modern Lives: Subjectivity, Schooling, and Social Change* (1st ed.). State University of New York Press. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/lib/ummt/reader.action?docID=3407664&query=&ppg=1>
- McNay, L. (2004). Agency and experience: gender as a lived relation. *The Sociological Review (Keele)*, 52(2_suppl), 173–190. 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00530.x
- Mezirow, J. (1991). In Knox A. B. (Ed.), *Transformative dimensions of adult learning* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Moen, P., Robison, J., & Dempster-McClain, D. (1995). Caregiving and Women's Well-being: A Life Course Approach. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 36(3), 259–273. 10.2307/2137342

Moreau, M., & Kerner, C. (2015). Care in academia: an exploration of student parents' experiences. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(2), 215–233.

10.1080/01425692.2013.814533

Morley, L. (2013). The rules of the game: women and the leaderist turn in higher education. *Gender and Education*, 25(1), 116–131. 10.1080/09540253.2012.740888

Müller, M. (2019). Emotional labour: a case of gender-specific exploitation. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 22(7), 841–862.

10.1080/13698230.2018.1438332

Neyer, G., & Bernardi, L. (2011). Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 36(2), 162–176. <http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/41151279>

Noddings, N. (2010). Moral education and caring. *Theory and Research in Education*, 8(2), 145–151. 10.1177/1477878510368617

O'Shea, S. (2015). Arriving, Surviving, and Succeeding: First-in-Family Women and Their Experiences of Transitioning into the First Year of University. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(5), 499–517. 10.1353/csd.2015.0053

O'Reilly, A. (2010). Outlaw(ing) Motherhood: A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-first Century. *Hecate*, 36(1/2), 17–29,230. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/821605693?parentSessionId=5CvtUYoejbTvFQcgcouTFj%2BLfjKtZ4AMkk1mcVplkRo%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=27934&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals#>

- Orloff, A. S. (1993). Gender and the Social Rights of Citizenship: The Comparative Analysis of Gender Relations and Welfare States. *American Sociological Review*, 58(3), 303–328. 10.2307/2095903
- Orth, U. (2017). 12 - The lifespan development of self-esteem. In Jule Specht (Ed.), *Personality Development Across the Lifespan* (1st ed., pp. 181–195). Elsevier Inc. 10.1016/B978-0-12-804674-6.00012-0
- Osborne, M., Marks, A., & Turner, E. (2004). Becoming a Mature Student: How Adult Applicants Weigh the Advantages and Disadvantages of Higher Education. *Higher Education*, 48(3), 291–315. <http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/4151519>
- O'Shea, S. (2020). Rethinking diversity: Combining Sen and Bourdieu to critically unpack higher education participation and persistence. In Huisman, J., and Tight, M. (Ed.), *Theory and method in higher education research* (1st ed., pp. 115–129). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/10.1108/S2056-3752202000000006008>
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. 10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). In Patton M. Q. (Ed.), *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, <https://archive.org/details/michael-quinn-patton-qualitative-research-evaluation-methods-integrating-theory-/page/462/mode/2up>

Paulus, T. M., Lester, J. N., & Dempster, P. G. (2014). In Paulus, T. M., Lester, J. N., & Dempster, P. G. (Ed.), *Digital tools for qualitative research* (1st ed.). SAGE Publications, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957671>

Poth, C. (2019). Realizing the integrative capacity of educational mixed methods research teams: using a complexity-sensitive strategy to boost innovation. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 42(3), 252–266. <https://doi-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/10.1080/1743727X.2019.1590813>

Reay, D. (2003). Mothers' involvement in their children's schooling: Social Reproduction in Action? *Bourdieu and Education*, 5(3), 55–71. 10.1177/1365480200500306

Reay, D. (2004). Gendering Bourdieu's concepts of capitals? Emotional capital, women and social class. *The Sociological Review (Keele)*, 52(2), 57–74. 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00524.x

Rich, A. C. (1976). *Of woman born: motherhood as experience and institution* (1st ed.). Norton.

Ridgeway, C. L. (2011). In Ridgeway C. L. (Ed.), *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World* (online edition, Oxford Academic, 1 May 2011 ed.). Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199755776.001.0001>

Rizzo, K. M., Schiffrin, H. H., & Liss, M. (2013). Insight into the Parenthood Paradox: Mental Health Outcomes of Intensive Mothering. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 22(5), 614–620. 10.1007/s10826-012-9615-z

Roberts, D., & Broton, B. J. (2010). The Paradox of Silence and Display: Sexual Violation of Enslaved Women and Contemporary Contradictions in Black Female

- Sexuality. In J. Brooten Bernadette (Ed.), *Beyond slavery: Overcoming its religious and sexual legacies* (1st ed., pp. 41–60). Palgrave Macmillan US. 10.1057/9780230113893_3
- Roksa, J., Trolan, T. L., Pascarella, E. T., Kilgo, C. A., Blaich, C., & Wise, K. S. (2017). Racial Inequality in Critical Thinking Skills: The Role of Academic and Diversity Experiences. *Research in Higher Education*, 58(2), 119–140. 10.1007/s11162-016-9423-1
- Rose, N. E. (2002). Where We Stand: Class Matters, and: Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics, and: Women's Untold Stories: Breaking Silence, Talking Back, Voicing Complexity, and: Women and the Politics of Class (review). *Feminist Formations*, 14(1), 221–226. 10.1353/nwsa.2002.0016
- Rossin-Slater, M., & Stearns, J. (2020). Time On with Baby and Time Off from Work. *The Future of Children*, 30(2), 35–52. <https://www-jstor-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/27075014>
- Ryan, R. M., Deci, E., & Michalos, A. C. (2014). Self-Determination Theory. In R. M. Ryan, E. Deci & A. C. Michalos (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (1st ed., pp. 5755–5760). Springer Netherlands. 10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_2630
- Ryan-Flood, R. (2009). Queering Representation: Ethics and Visibility in Research. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 13(2), 216–228. 10.1080/10894160802695387
- Sahlar, F. S., Üstündağ-budak, A. m., & Nehir Türkmen, S. (2020). Working Mothers: Intensive Mothering and Momism. *Yaşam Becerileri Psikoloji Dergisi*, 4(7), 115–125. 10.31461/ybpd.732263

Satariano, B., & Curtis, S. E. (2018). The experience of social determinants of health within a Southern European Maltese culture. *Health & Place*, 51(May 2018), 45–51.

10.1016/j.healthplace.2018.02.011

Seidman, I. (2006). In Seidman I. (Ed.), *Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (3rd ed.). Teachers College

P. https://archive.org/details/interviewingasqu0000seid_j5x1

Sen, A. (2001). In Sen A. (Ed.), *Development as freedom* (2nd ed.). Oxford U.P.

Sihto, T. (2015). Choosing to Work? Mothers Return-to-Work Decisions, Social Class, and the Local Labor Market. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 5(3), 23–40.

10.19154/njwls.v5i3.4805

Silverman, D. (2020). Collecting qualitative data during a pandemic. *Communication & Medicine (Equinox Publishing Group)*, 17(1), 76–84. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cam.192>

Skeggs, B. (2019). The forces that shape us: The entangled vine of gender, race and class. *The Sociological Review*, 67(1), 28–35. 10.1177/0038026118821334

Sollars, V. (2018). Shaping early childhood education services in Malta: historical events, current affairs, future challenges. *Early Years (London, England)*, 38(4), 337–350.

10.1080/09575146.2018.1512561

Stone, C. M. M., & O'Shea, S. E. (2019). My children... think it's cool that Mum is a uni student: Women with caring responsibilities studying online. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(6), 97–110. 10.14742/ajet.5504

Stone, C., & O'Shea, S. (2013). Time, Money, Leisure and Guilt--The Gendered

Challenges of Higher Education for Mature-Age Students. *Australian Journal of Adult*

Learning, 53(1), 90–110. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/time-money-leisure-guilt-gendered-challenges/docview/1413414642/se-2?accountid=27934>

Stone, C., & O'Shea, S. (2019). Older, online and first: Recommendations for retention and success. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(1), 57–69. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.3913>

Sutton, H. (2022). Consider the Recruitment Benefits of On-Campus Childcare. *Women in Higher Education*, 31(2), 8–15. 10.1002/whe.21098

Szalkowicz, G., & Andrewartha, L. (2024). Supporting students who are parents to succeed in Australian higher education. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 64(1), 105–125. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/supporting-students-who-are-parents-succeed/docview/3058870794/se-2?accountid=27934>

Tett, L. (2004). Mature working-class students in an 'elite' university: Discourses of risk, choice and exclusion. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 36(2), 252–264. <https://doi.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/10.1080/02660830.2004.11661500>

Tett, L., & Merrill, B. (2001). Gender, change and identity -- Mature women students in universities / Response. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71(24(6)), 358–360. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/gender-change-identity-mature-women-students/docview/216979057/se-2?accountid=27934>

Thomsen, K. (2002). In Thomsen K. (Ed.), *Building Resilient Students : Integrating Resiliency into What You Already Know and Do* (1st ed.). Corwin Press. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/lib/ummt/reader.action?docID=1994870&ppg=4>

Tighe, L. A., & Davis-Kean, P. (2021). The Influence of College Education on Parents and Children in Low-Income Families. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 67(3), 293–328.

10.13110/merrpalmquar1982.67.3.0293

Tracy, S. J. (2024). In Tracy S. J. (Ed.), *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact* (1st ed.). John Wiley &

Sons. <http://edl.emi.gov.et/jspui/bitstream/123456789/337/1/Qualitative%20Research%20Methods%20%28%20PDFDrive%20%29%20%281%29.pdf>

Tronto, J. C. (1998). An Ethic of Care. *Generations Journal*, 22(3), 15–

20. <https://ejournals.um.edu.mt/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/ethic-care/docview/1990240640/se-2?accountid=27934>

UNESCO. (2022). UNESCO Publishes OLC Report on Advancing Universal Access to Quality Digital Learning. Paper presented at the *World Higher Education*

Conference (WHEC 2022, Barcelona. , 1(May 18-20)

653. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED622501> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED622501.pdf>

UNICEF. (2020, June). *Gender Equality*

Global Annual

Results Report 2019. <https://www.unicef.org/>. Retrieved 02/02/2025,

from <https://www.unicef.org/media/73826/file/Global-annual-results-report-2019-gender-equality-accessible.pdf>

Vella, R. (2022). Leadership and women: The space between us. Narrating the stories of senior female educational leaders in Malta. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, 50(1), 121–139. 10.1177/1741143220929034

Walby, S. (2023). Authoritarianism, violence, and varieties of gender regimes: Violence as an institutional domain. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 98(2), 102677.

10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102677

Walzer, S. (1996). Thinking about the Baby: Gender and Divisions of Infant Care. *Social Problems (Berkeley, Calif.)*, 43(2), 219–234. 10.1525/sp.1996.43.2.03x0206x

Weiner-Levy, N. (2006). The Flagbearers: Israeli Druze Women Challenge Traditional Gender Roles. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 37(3), 217–235.

10.1525/aeq.2006.37.3.217

Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*, 30(6), 707–722.

10.1080/03075070500340036

Williams, J. C. (2005). The glass ceiling and the maternal wall in academia. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2005(130), 91–105. 10.1002/he.181

Yoder, J. D., Snell, A. F., & Tobias, A. (2012). Balancing Multicultural Competence with Social Justice: Feminist Beliefs and Optimal Psychological Functioning. *The Counselling Psychologist*, 40(8), 1101–1132. 10.1177/0011000011426296

APPENDIX 1: Table with themes

Theme	Common Threads	Unique Insights / Quotes
Motivations for Returning to Education	Desire for personal growth, career change, independence, fulfilment, and curiosity	“I needed something just for myself” / “I wanted to find meaning again”
Expectations from Education	Career backup plans, personal empowerment, job satisfaction, and improved opportunities	“If I was going to do something, it had to make me proud”
Opportunities Arising	Career progression, increased confidence, some promotions, and new job offers	“Word of mouth brought me clients” / “The MBA helped me apply for a managerial role”
Benefits to Family / Children	Role modelling, increased income, helping kids with homework, and valuing education	“My kids saw me studying when they were in my tummy” / “They know now they can do it too”
Support Systems	Mostly family (spouses, mothers, in-laws), a few peer communities, occasional institutional support	“My mom used to cook for me during thesis” / “My husband took over grocery shopping”
Challenges Faced	Time poverty, burnout, sick children, lack of institutional flexibility, balancing work/study/parenting	“I studied while breastfeeding” / “My son got sick every other week in childcare”
Coping Strategies	Working/studying at night or early morning, scheduling, emotional regulation, taking study breaks	“Took breaks between modules to recharge” / “Worked in the car outside ballet practice”
Guilt and tension	Almost universal maternal guilt, fear of neglecting children, conflict with societal expectations	“I still feel guilty today when I think of those missed moments” / “My home was a pigsty, but it was worth it”
Institutional Support	Mixed responses: some praised flexibility (online learning), others reported no accommodations	“No difference in treatment between mothers and child-free students” / “No stipend”
Social Perceptions / Awareness	Very low visibility of campaigns, emphasis is on return to work rather than education	“Returning to work is supported, not education” / “Education might make us too aware”

Personal Growth / Empowerment	Increased confidence, sense of achievement, resilience, and change in self-perception	“I’m more confident now. I know I can face any challenge.”
Advice to Other Mothers	Be realistic, build support systems, don’t be afraid, but know it’s hard, timing matters	“No one tells you how heavy it is” / “Make sure you have at least one person to count on”
Messages to Policymakers	Financial aid, extra leave for mothers, more awareness campaigns, peer mentorships	“Extra leave for mothers” / “Why is undergrad free and postgrad not?” / “Mentorship would help a lot”

APPENDIX 2: UREC Approval

5/10/25, 5:07 PM

University of Malta Mail - The status of your REDP form (SWB-2024-01027) has been updated to Acknowledged



L-Università
ta' Malta

Elvira Zerafa <elvira.zerafa.13@um.edu.mt>

The status of your REDP form (SWB-2024-01027) has been updated to Acknowledged

3 messages

form.urec@um.edu.mt <form.urec@um.edu.mt>
To: elvira.zerafa.13@um.edu.mt

20 January 2025 at 12:02

Dear Elvira Zerafa,

Please note that the status of your REDP form (SWB-2024-01027) has been set to *Acknowledged*.

This status change was accompanied by the following explanation/justification: *Dear Elvira Zerafa, Your research ethics application has been received. As indicated in the Research Ethics Review Procedures, REDP forms which have no self-assessment issues are kept for record and audit purposes only. Hence, research may commence. Kindly note that FREC will not issue any form of approval as the responsibility for the self-assessment part lies exclusively with the researcher. Regards, SWB FREC*

You can keep track of your applications by visiting: <https://www.um.edu.mt/research/ethics/redp-form/frontEnd/>.

*****This email has been automatically generated by URECA. Please do not reply. If you wish to communicate with your F/REC please use the respective email address.*****

APPENDIX 3: Facebook post



APPENDIX 4: Information letter



Information letter

03/12/2024

Dear Participant,

My name is Elvira Zerafa, and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master's Degree in Gender Society and Culture. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled "Balancing Dreams and Duties: A Qualitative Exploration of Opportunities and Challenges for Mothers Returning to Education in Malta"; this is being supervised by Dr Andreana Dibben.

This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by mothers in Malta who return to education and provide an in-depth understanding of the motivations, barriers, and support systems influencing their educational journeys. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of what policy recommendations could be made to better support mothers in achieving their educational aspirations while balancing familial responsibilities.

Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview in person or online at a time and place chosen and convenient for you. This will take you approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete.

Data collected will be treated confidentially, anonymized, it will be stored on my personal laptop and only myself and my supervisor will have access to it.

The findings which emerge from this research may be published (e.g., in a dissertation, academic journals) and/or presented (e.g., during conferences, meetings). Your name (or any other identifying information) will not appear when the findings are reported.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased if this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you.

Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased.

All data collected will be voice-recorded and stored in an anonymised form. On completion of the study, all information will be erased within 12 months.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, you may contact me, or my supervisor on the details provided below.

Yours Sincerely,

Elvira Zerafa

elvira.zerafa.13@um.edu.mt

+35699830751

Dr Andreana Dibben
Senior Lecturer

andreana.dibben@um.edu.mt

+356 2340 3347

APPENDIX 5: Interview questions

"Balancing Dreams and Duties: A Qualitative Exploration of Opportunities and Challenges for Mothers Returning to Education in Malta"

Can you share a bit about yourself and your background (e.g., family, work, educational journey)?

1. What motivated you to return to education after becoming a mother?
2. What were your expectations when you decided to pursue further education?
4. What opportunities have arisen for you as a result of returning to education?
5. In what ways do you believe your educational journey benefits your family or children?
6. What kind of support systems (e.g., family, friends, institutions) have helped you in this process?
7. What are the biggest challenges you've faced in balancing motherhood and returning to education?
8. Can you describe a time when you felt overwhelmed or questioned your decision to return to education? How did you overcome it?
9. How do you manage your time between studying, parenting, and other responsibilities?
10. What strategies or habits have you developed to maintain balance in your life?
11. Have you experienced any guilt or tension in balancing your roles as a mother and a student? How do you address it?
12. How have educational institutions in Malta accommodated or supported mothers returning to education?
13. Do you feel that there is enough awareness or encouragement for mothers in Malta to return to education? Why or why not?
14. How has this journey changed your perspective on your capabilities or ambitions?

15. What are your long-term goals, and how does education play a role in achieving them?
16. If you could advise other mothers considering returning to education, what would you tell them?
17. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences or insights that we haven't covered?
18. What message would you like to convey to policymakers, educators, or other stakeholders about supporting mothers returning to education?

APPENDIX 6: Participant Consent Form



Participant's Consent Form

“Balancing Dreams and Duties: A Qualitative Exploration of Opportunities and Challenges for Mothers Returning to Education in Malta”

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Elvira Zerafa.

This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. If I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymized or published), unless the erasure of data would render it impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymized form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will aim to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by mothers in Malta who return to education. I am aware that the interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.

4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by contributing to a better understanding of what policy recommendations could be made to better support mothers in achieving their educational aspirations while balancing familial responsibilities.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymized form and erased on the completion of the study and following publication of results within 12 months of completion of the study.
8. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports, or presentations arising from this research.
9. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____