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Motherhood and Persistence in Higher Education: The Experiences of Student Mothers at a Public University in the Brazilian Amazon

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges to persistence experienced by student mothers at a public university in the Brazilian Amazon, focusing on their academic trajectories and perceptions of institutional support and student retention policies. It adopts a mixed-methods case-study design with qualitative emphasis. The participants were 32 students who identified as mothers and remained affiliated with the Federal University of Pará, including those temporarily absent from their studies or with suspended enrolment. Data was collected between September 2025 and March 2026 through an online questionnaire distributed via the university's social media channels and posters displayed on campus. Closed-ended responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, while open-ended responses were examined through thematic analysis. The findings point to inequalities in support networks; the overlap between care, domestic work, paid employment and study; financial and transport difficulties; constraints on participation in academic activities; and varied experiences of support from teaching staff. Twenty-eight participants (87.5%) reported having considered suspending or leaving their course. At the same time, some accounts presented motherhood as a source of motivation to persist and seek better living conditions. The article concludes that persistence cannot be attributed solely to individual resilience: it requires institutional measures that recognise caring responsibilities, including financial support, provision for childcare, academic flexibility and the promotion of gender equality.

1 Introduction

Women's participation in Brazilian higher education has expanded over recent decades. In the 2023 Higher Education Census, women accounted for 59.1% of enrolments,approximately 5.9 million out of a total of around 10 million and formed the majority of new entrants, with approximately 2.9 million out of a total of 5 million (INEP, 2023). These figures demonstrate women's substantial presence in higher education, but they do not establish that women and men have equal opportunities to remain in and complete their courses.

This distinction matters because participation in university is shaped by inequalities in the distribution of paid and unpaid work. The combination of study, employment, domestic tasks and caring responsibilities can create an excessive workload and affect women's academic trajectories (O'Reilly, 2005; Araújo, 2006; Sorj et al., 2007). For students who are mothers, these demands are connected to their children's everyday needs and to the practical support available both within and beyond the university.

Motherhood, however, is not a uniform experience, nor can it be assumed that all student mothers face the same difficulties. The possibilities for combining study and care depend on socioeconomic circumstances, the distribution of responsibilities within the household, the availability of support networks and institutional conditions. Persistence therefore cannot be reduced to an individual capacity to manage time or overcome obstacles. It also depends on how care work is distributed and recognised, and on the resources and responses provided by the university.

The institutional report *UFPA in Numbers 2026*, covering the 2025 reference year, brings together information on various areas of the university and presents undergraduate data, including breakdowns by gender (UFPA, 2026). However, the report does not identify motherhood or parental responsibilities as categories for characterising students, nor does it make it possible to determine how many students are mothers. This absence renders motherhood statistically invisible in the report examined and highlights a limitation of this public information source. It does not, by itself, establish that the Federal University of Pará (UFPA) holds no data on the subject in other administrative records. It does, however, underscore the importance of investigating student mothers' experiences without assuming that their presence and needs are adequately recognised in the institutional data currently available.

This documentary gap is part of a broader problem: student mothers pursue academic trajectories while managing caring responsibilities and family, economic and institutional conditions that may either facilitate or impede their continuation in higher education. Understanding their experiences requires examining how these responsibilities relate to support networks, academic life and institutional responses, without placing the sole responsibility for reconciling motherhood and university on the students themselves. Investigating these issues at a public university in the Brazilian Amazon also makes it possible to situate participants' experiences within a specific regional context, without claiming that they represent all student mothers in the region or the country.

The study is guided by the following research question: How do student mothers at UFPA experience the challenges of persistence in higher education, and how do they relate their academic trajectories to caring responsibilities, support networks and institutional responses? Its aim is to analyse the challenges to persistence experienced by student mothers at UFPA, considering their academic trajectories, caring responsibilities, available support networks and perceptions of institutional responses. The study does not seek to estimate the proportion of mothers among all the university's students; rather, it examines the experiences reported by the participants and the conditions that, in their view, shape their ability to persist.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework, followed by an account of the research methods. The findings are then presented and discussed, before the article concludes with final considerations.

2 Theoretical framework: motherhood, care and persistence in higher education

2.1 The sexual division of labour and the social organisation of care

The sexual division of labour provides a sociological framework for understanding why caring responsibilities fall unequally on women and men, and how this distribution shapes the academic lives of student mothers. Kergoat (2009) defines this division as a form of organising social relations between

the sexes, structured by two principles: separation, which associates forms of work with men or women, and hierarchisation, which assigns greater social value to activities historically associated with men. Within this arrangement, domestic and caring work tends to be treated as a private responsibility of women, despite being essential to the everyday reproduction of life.

Federici (2017) situates this work beyond family relations: social reproduction sustains the workforce and collective life yet remains frequently undervalued and unrecognised. This perspective shifts the analysis away from an assumed individual difficulty in “balancing roles” and towards the social and institutional relations that distribute time, resources and responsibilities unequally. Women’s entry into higher education, therefore, does not automatically redistribute domestic work or create equivalent conditions for study.

In this article, the term “triple burden” is used descriptively to refer to the overlap between academic study, domestic work and care and, where applicable, paid employment. It does not denote a universal or uniform experience among the participants: some may not be in paid employment, while others may have access to different forms of support. Its analytical value lies in making visible the accumulation of demands and the costs that may fall on students, including time, income, rest and academic opportunities. without presenting overwork as an inherent feature of motherhood or a failure of personal organisation.

2.2 Motherhood, academic trajectories and persistence

Persistence in higher education is not limited to remaining enrolled or formally completing a course. It also involves the conditions that enable students to attend classes, complete assessments and placements, and participate in academic activities throughout trajectories that may include interruptions, periods of suspended enrolment and returns to study. For student mothers, these possibilities are shaped by the interplay between care, material resources, support networks and institutional arrangements. Persistence should therefore be examined as a social and institutional condition, rather than solely as the outcome of individual determination.

Brazilian scholarship has shown that access to family, community and institutional support can shape mothers’ experiences at university. Bitencourt (2019), Vieira et al. (2019) and Lopes and Ramalho (2023), as discussed in this article, highlight such factors as shared care, financial and emotional support, and access to care services. These resources, however, are not equally available and cannot replace the institution’s responsibility to create conditions in which students with parental responsibilities can participate in university life.

This discussion is particularly relevant to the Amazonian context, although the available studies should be considered considering their specific scope, rather than treated as representative of the entire region. In a qualitative study of eleven student mothers at the Institute of Nature and Culture of the Federal University of Amazonas, in the interior of the state, Silva and Souza (2025) examine discrimination in the university environment, the division of parental responsibilities and the relationship between motherhood

and academic attrition. The study also highlights the importance of support networks and the effects of overwork, providing a regional point of comparison for understanding how care and gender relations shape university trajectories.

In Belém, Silva and Silva (2026) examine the experiences of student mothers on a Pedagogy course at the Federal Institute of Pará. Drawing on interviews with students and administrators, the authors relate inadequate support infrastructure, including breastfeeding spaces and playrooms—to difficulties in persisting with study, and discuss the gap between institutional recognition of the need and the actions available. Because these studies focus on institutions, courses and groups, they do not warrant generalisations about the Amazon as a whole. Their contribution to this article is to demonstrate that regional research on motherhood and higher education is emerging, while further studies are needed across different Amazonian institutions and contexts.

International research likewise reinforces the need to understand persistence in relation to the specific contexts in which study and care intersect. In a qualitative study of student mothers at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, Maluleke et al. (2023) identify differing experiences of family support, financial circumstances, academic demands and perceived university support. Motherhood emerges both as a motivation to continue studying and as a source of demands and strain. The study is useful for comparison because it demonstrates that experiences of support and persistence are not uniform. However, as it concerns a particular institution and group, its findings cannot be transferred directly to the Brazilian context.

In Australia, Andrewartha et al. (2022) compiled available data, examined institutional policies and practices, and consulted students who are parents. The report identifies difficulties relating to time, financial circumstances, inflexible timetables, the organisation of placements and the limited availability of support services and spaces. The authors also note the scarcity of institutional data on students' parental status, which limits the development and monitoring of targeted initiatives. As a research report conducted outside Brazil, its contribution here is comparative: it helps frame questions about institutional recognition, data collection and the suitability of university structures, without assuming that the Australian and Brazilian systems are equivalent.

Taken together, these studies indicate that motherhood does not determine a single academic trajectory. Persistence is shaped by the interaction between caring responsibilities, material and emotional resources, and institutional practices. In this article, Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional perspective informs a cautious approach to generalising about the experience of "student mothers" and recognises that gender relations intersect with other relations of power. Since dimensions not directly investigated by the questionnaire cannot be established as empirical findings, this perspective is used as an interpretive guide, rather than as a claim that the study analysed all the participants' social intersections.

2.3 Institutional responsibility, rights and student retention policies

An equity-based approach recognises that formally equal rules may have unequal effects when they assume that students have no caring responsibilities. Inflexible timetables, attendance requirements, uniform deadlines and academic activities organised without alternatives may restrict the participation of those caring for children. Discussions of persistence should therefore not place the burden on students to adapt motherhood to university routines; they should also consider how institutions organise activities, support and procedures.

In Brazil, Law No. 6,202/1975 provides for home-based academic assignments for pregnant students during a specified period of pregnancy and the postnatal period. Law No. 14,925/2024 provides for the continuation of educational provision and the extension of deadlines in circumstances including childbirth, the birth of a child, adoption and obtaining legal custody for adoption. More recently, Law No. 14,914/2024 established the Parental Persistence Programme in Education (*Programa de Permanência Parental na Educação*, Propepe) within the National Student Assistance Policy. The programme aims to create physical infrastructure and welcoming spaces for student mothers and fathers with children under the age of six.

These provisions recognise that parenthood calls for institutional adjustments and responses. Their existence, however, does not demonstrate that the rights are known, accessible or adequately implemented in each institution; nor does it, by itself, guarantee childcare, financial assistance or flexibility across all academic activities. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the legal framework, the policies and facilities actually provided, and students' reported experiences. This distinction makes it possible to analyse participants' perceptions of support and inclusion without treating legislation as evidence that their needs have been met.

The literature reviewed suggests that institutional responses may include accessible information about rights, financial assistance, appropriate spaces for students with children, academic and psychological support, and procedures that take parental responsibilities into account. Such measures should not be assumed to exist or to be effective in the case examined; rather, they are relevant considerations in discussions of needs identified in the literature and, where applicable, by the participants. The analysis in this article is organised around three related themes: caring responsibilities and the support networks students draw upon; the relationship between these conditions, academic trajectories and persistence; and students' perceptions of institutional support and responses. This framework allows the accounts to be interpreted without assuming that experiences are uniform or that the sample represents all student mothers at UFPA.

3 Research context and methodological procedures

3.1 Research context

The study was conducted at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), a public higher education institution in the Brazilian Amazon. Student assistance at UFPA operates within a regulatory framework that

includes the National Student Assistance Programme (*Programa Nacional de Assistência Estudantil*, PNAES), established by Decree No. 7,234/2010 (Brasil, 2010), and its subsequent institutionalisation through Law No. 14,914/2024 (Brasil, 2024a). This study does not evaluate the university's student assistance policy as a whole. Rather, it examines student mothers' reported experiences and perceptions of the conditions for reconciling caring responsibilities, academic study and persistence.

3.2 Research design, participants and instrument

This case study uses a mixed-methods design with a qualitative emphasis. The quantitative component is descriptive and summarises frequencies for responses that could be classified. The qualitative component examines participants' accounts of motherhood, care, academic difficulties, participation and strategies related to persistence.

Data was collected in 2025 and 2026 using an online questionnaire designed in Google Forms and comprising ten open- and closed-ended questions. The instrument covered children's ages; living arrangements and support networks; paid and domestic work; difficulties in continuing with study; the reconciliation of motherhood with other responsibilities; thoughts of suspending or leaving a course; self-assessment of academic performance; participation in academic activities; perceived differential treatment on the grounds of being a mother; and strategies for maintaining academic performance.

The questionnaire was advertised on the university's Instagram account and through posters displayed near university restaurants, bus stops and campus entrances. Responses were included if participants had completed the motherhood section, identified as student mothers enrolled on UFPA undergraduate courses, and remained affiliated with their course. This included participants who were temporarily absent from their studies or had suspended their enrolment while retaining their course affiliation.

The initial dataset contained 37 responses identified as coming from student mothers. After duplicate submissions were checked, five duplicate records were identified, and the most recent response from each participant was retained. The final analytical corpus comprised 32 distinct participants. As participation was voluntary and the questionnaire was advertised through these channels, the sample was non-probability based. It does not allow the prevalence of student mothers at UFPA to be estimated, nor do the findings support statistical generalisation to this wider population.

Participants are identified by codes E1–E32. These codes are used to present excerpts without disclosing names or identifying other details that are not necessary to the analysis.

3.3 Analytical procedures

Responses that could be quantified were organised as absolute frequencies and percentages. The denominator was the number of valid responses to each question. Responses concerning children's living arrangements and support networks were classified into four categories: explicitly identified support; explicitly stated absence of a support network; limited or intermittent support; and ambiguous or insufficient information for classification. Classification was based on the information provided by

participants; support was neither inferred nor assumed to be absent where a response did not allow it to be determined.

Open-ended responses were analysed thematically, drawing on the procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and the discussion by Souza (2019). Themes were developed through familiarisation with the corpus, initial coding, grouping and reviewing codes, defining themes and producing the analytical account. The analysis resulted in six themes: family composition and support networks; overload and time management; economic and logistical barriers; risk of study interruption and academic participation; institutional support and inclusion; and strategies for persistence.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee on 22 September 2025 (Opinion No. 7,850,594; CAAE 89357425.3.0000.0018). Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the study's aims and procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures for protecting anonymity and confidentiality. The questionnaire also stated that the study had received ethics approval. Responses were analysed and reported in anonymised form, with codes used to identify quoted excerpts.

4 Results

4.1 Family composition and support networks

After duplicate submissions were removed, the analytical corpus comprised 32 participants. Twenty reported having one child (62.5%), eight had two (25.0%), three had three (9.4%), and one had four (3.1%). Together, the participants had 49 children, whose reported ages ranged from four months to 25 years. This variation describes different family arrangements, but does not establish, in itself, the intensity of care required, children's dependence or how responsibilities are distributed within each family.

The question about children's living arrangements and support networks combined two issues and elicited responses with varying levels of detail. Based only on what could be identified from responses to this item, 12 participants named a person or service providing support (37.5%); six explicitly stated that they had no support network (18.8%); four described support as limited or intermittent (12.5%); and ten gave ambiguous responses or insufficient information for classification (31.3%).

Table 1

Responses concerning children's living arrangements and support networks

Situation identifiable from the response	*n*	%
Support explicitly identified	12	37.5
Explicitly stated absence of a support network	6	18.8
Limited or intermittent support	4	12.5
Ambiguous response or insufficient information for classification	10	31.3
Total	**32**	**100.0**

Note. Classification is based solely on information provided in response to the question about children's living arrangements and support networks. Responses indicating only co-residence, or not specifying whether support was available, were classified as ambiguous or insufficient. Percentages may not total 100% because of rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis of the study data.

The high proportion of ambiguous or insufficient responses reflects a limitation of the instrument: because living arrangements and support were addressed in the same question, brief answers did not always clarify whether participants meant that their children lived with them, that they had support, or both. The table therefore describes what participants explicitly reported; it is not an estimate of the prevalence of support networks among all participants. Nor does naming a person or service indicate how available or reliable that support is.

Some accounts show that access to care was directly related to participants' ability to attend academic activities. E8 said that, without a support network, they could not attend classes; E1 reported being unable to secure a nursery place. In other cases, support was available only at times or under specific circumstances. E2 said they could not always rely on the help available; E5 reported that an aunt cared for their daughter on some evenings so they could attend university; and E26 said their children were cared for only while they were at university. These accounts show why support is not simply present or absent: its continuity, predictability and compatibility with study schedules also matter.

Participants described the availability of other people or services as one of the conditions that enabled or hindered their attendance. Vieira et al. (2019) likewise highlights the importance of family support and university nurseries for student mothers' trajectories, while Lopes and Ramalho (2023) discuss how insufficient family, financial and emotional support can make persistence more precarious. The accounts in this study are consistent with this literature in showing that academic participation is connected to the practical organisation of care.

Responses named mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters, as well as partners, fathers, other relatives and early-years education services. E6 mentioned help from their mother; E5, support from an aunt on some evenings; and E29 identified a sister as the person caring for their daughter. Men's involvement was also mentioned: E10 referred to full-time school and the child's father, while E22 described arranging

study times according to the availability of both the child's mother and father. The accounts thus show varied arrangements, with women relatives frequently mentioned, but do not indicate a complete absence of men or services.

Drawing on Kergoat (2009), these arrangements can be understood in relation to the sexual division of labour. Distributing care among relatives may ease some of the demands placed on a student without necessarily reorganising responsibility for care more broadly or equitably. The data cannot establish that all support networks are predominantly female or measure the share of care assumed by each person. They do show that women relatives were frequently named as sources of support.

Silva and Souza's (2025) study of student mothers in Amazonas also highlights the importance of support networks and the consequences of their fragility for the time available for study. In dialogue with that research and with Kergoat (2009), these findings position support networks as part of the everyday arrangements that make it possible, to varying degrees, to combine care and academic study. Such support may ease difficulties without eliminating overload or ensuring stable conditions for persistence.

4.2 Overload, work and time management

Participants described different combinations of paid work, domestic work and care, including employment, self-employment, placements, unpaid domestic work and periods of unemployment. These circumstances were not mutually exclusive: for some, paid work or placement overlapped with domestic tasks, motherhood and the demands of an undergraduate degree. Workload therefore cannot be understood solely in terms of employment status; unemployment or absence from formal employment does not mean freedom from work.

E5, for example, reported working "more than 40 hours a week" and said they completed university work during the night while meeting their maternal responsibilities during the day. E16 wrote "42 hours + domestic work and being a mother", combining paid work, housework and motherhood in a single response. E20 recorded "domestic work, 40 hours" and reported receiving help from their grandmother and mother. Since responses did not always specify the period covered or clearly distinguish between types of activity, these figures are treated as participants' accounts, not as directly comparable measures of working hours.

This overlap reflects the sexual division of labour described by Kergoat (2009), which organises productive and reproductive activities unequally. Federici (2017) helps explain the invisibility of reproductive work, despite its essential role in sustaining everyday life. Academic demands did not replace domestic and caring tasks in participants' accounts; they were added to routines already occupied by them. Study was often fitted into residual hours or pursued through arrangements that required giving up time in other areas of life.

E5 made this reorganisation explicit: "I try to deal with university work during the night, and during the day I take care of my maternal responsibilities" (E5). Study was shifted to the night, while daytime was

devoted to care. This account illustrates how study time may depend on whether academic work can be fitted in after other responsibilities have been met.

Other participants described similarly demanding routines. E21 reported: “In the morning I do my placement, in the afternoon I go to university, in the evening I usually do my housework, I get up very early to study texts, and at weekends I travel to spend time with my family” (E21). The account shows how placement, classes, domestic tasks, early-morning study and weekend travel were fitted into the week, although it does not allow the time devoted to each activity to be quantified.

Reported strategies included planning schedules, studying during available intervals, using travel time, relying on relatives and rearranging commitments. E3 said they adapted their routine and used travel time to keep up with course content but also gave up social engagements and sleep to complete academic and domestic tasks. Such organisation could support persistence, but did not redistribute responsibilities or increase the time available.

Some participants explicitly described reduced rest. E28 said: “I usually sleep between four and five hours a day so I can manage the bare minimum” (E28). The phrase “manage the bare minimum” suggests that the demands were perceived to exceed the time available. E5 also reported sleeping less to organise their responsibilities. These accounts cannot establish how common this pattern was among all 32 participants or its effects on health, but they show that sacrificing rest formed part of some participants’ efforts to maintain their academic and domestic routines.

The possibility of studying was also related to the involvement of others. E16 mentioned help from their mother; E20, support from their grandmother and mother; and E21 described a routine in which placement, classes, domestic tasks and travel had to be coordinated. Where support was limited or tasks remained concentrated on the student, study time could come at the expense of rest, social life or other activities.

Overall, participants described different ways of managing paid work, domestic tasks, care and academic demands. Their accounts suggest that this process was shaped by the social division of labour and by the availability of time and support, rather than being simply an individual solution to competing obligations. Persistence involved practical strategies, but these could entail extended working days, night-time study, the use of short intervals and the sacrifice of rest.

4.3 Economic, logistical and care-related barriers

The difficulties participants reported in continuing their studies were interconnected. Financial constraints, travel, the availability of care and academic schedules affected both class attendance and participation in activities beyond the classroom. E1 summarised these pressures by mentioning “no income for fares and food”, a lack of someone to care for their daughter and a timetable that “no longer fits my reality as a mother”. E14 similarly wrote: “Sometimes there’s no money for fares, and no one permanent to look after my child”. These accounts suggest that persistence requires both material

resources and practical conditions for care, and that the absence of one may intensify the effects of lacking the other.

Transport involved more than the cost of fares. Distance, bus routes, overcrowding and travel time also shaped attendance and participation in activities with less predictable schedules. E3 mentioned the distance to the university, the bus stop being far from home and irregular bus times for additional activities. E31 referred to the distance between home and campus, while E28 described a journey involving four buses and the need to organise travel around their child's therapy sessions. These examples show how travel can consume time and require additional planning, particularly when coordinated with care. They do not allow the duration or cost of journeys to be estimated for all participants.

Care arrangements also differed in stability and availability. E22 reported that the lack of a full-time school made their routine difficult and that their mother, who might have helped with care, also had to work. E8 described difficulty finding someone to look after the children and obstacles to taking them on public transport. Other accounts indicated that a lack of available care restricted class attendance or participation. Having a support network in name did not necessarily mean that continuous care was available, that it fitted academic schedules or that it could meet specific needs.

The incompatibility extended beyond scheduled classes. E5 said they could attend classes but could not always take part in placements, research or scholarships offered in the morning, when they had no one to look after their daughter. E3 also linked participation in additional activities to their timing, duration and the day on which they were held. E28 reported difficulties attending additional activities and optional courses because of their child's therapy sessions and the demands of travel. These accounts indicate that academic opportunities offered at different times may be difficult to take up for those coordinating study, care and transport. They document this tension in participants' experiences, but do not assess the university's provision of activities.

In some accounts, difficulties arranging care were linked to bringing children into university spaces. E27 reported that, when they could not find someone to care for their child, they might miss class and also mentioned restrictions imposed by some lecturers on children being present. This account does not justify generalising about the university or its teaching staff. It does show how a lack of alternative care can become a barrier to attendance.

Participants described different consequences of these barriers: some restricted their involvement to certain activities, while others reported attendance difficulties, suspended studies or thoughts of doing so. E11, for example, mentioned transport and childcare difficulties and reported having suspended their studies. E1 said they enrolled in courses when possible but had not progressed as hoped for three years. These accounts do not allow academic trajectories to be attributed to a single cause, but show how economic, transport and care-related difficulties can accumulate and make continuation more demanding.

This interpretation is consistent with Maluleke et al. (2023), who identify tensions between financial constraints, parental responsibilities and academic demands in another national context. Bitencourt (2019) relates material circumstances and access to support to gender inequalities shaping university trajectories, while Lopes and Ramalho (2023) discuss the overlap between motherhood, work and study. The accounts examined here show how transport and food costs, incompatible schedules and unavailable care can reinforce one another, without implying that all participants experienced the same difficulties.

4.4 Risk of interruption, academic performance and participation

Twenty-eight participants (87.5%) reported having considered interrupting their studies, having suspended their course or intending to do so; three (9.4%) said they had not considered this possibility. One participant (3.1%) reported previous periods of suspension and absence but said that, since returning, leaving their degree was no longer an option. Because the question brought together different experiences, thoughts, past suspension and future intentions, the figure is not a measure of attrition or actual suspension. It indicates how often continuation had been called into question.

Participants cited a range of reasons, including a lack of childcare support, the need to work or earn an income, financial constraints, exhaustion, emotional distress, travel difficulties and incompatibility between academic and family demands. E1 conveyed the recurring nature of this concern: “Every day. It’s very difficult with no support from anyone…” (E1). E5 linked the possibility of interrupting the course to the need to return to the labour market, the lack of a wider support network and mental exhaustion. E24 associated the intention to seek employment with the incompatibility between working in retail and continuing the course. These accounts show that interruption was considered in contexts where study competed with material needs and caring responsibilities; no single cause explains all the experiences.

E28’s account illustrates how obstacles could accumulate within one trajectory: the participant linked thoughts of leaving to a lack of support, distance, costs and the need to pay someone to care for their child. The response also described emotional distress. This individual account shows how caring demands, travel and financial constraints could combine and increase the personal cost of persistence. In dialogue with Vieira et al. (2019), Bitencourt (2019) and Maluleke et al. (2023), the findings situate thoughts of interruption within a broader context of parental responsibilities, material constraints and academic demands, without implying that all trajectories are identical.

Self-assessments of academic performance varied. Some participants assessed their performance positively despite demanding routines. E6 described their academic progress as “excellent” and reported a grade average above nine; E28 also reported a high average, although they felt they could achieve better results with more support. By contrast, E26 described their performance as “very low”, linking this assessment to lack of motivation and frustration, while E1 called it “terrible”. Other responses included “average”, “fair” and “reasonable”, while some did not provide enough information to assess performance.

This variation shows that barriers to persistence do not translate uniformly into self-reported academic outcomes. A positive assessment can coexist with fatigue, limited participation and a sense that more could be achieved under different conditions. It should not be taken as evidence that participants studied under equitable conditions or without overload. Negative assessments, in turn, convey experiences of difficulty but cannot be attributed to a single factor.

Academic participation also varies by activity. Some participants reported attending classes but having more limited involvement in placements, research, outreach, events, scholarships or optional courses. E5 said they could attend classes but not always take part in placements, research or scholarships because many opportunities were offered in the morning, when they had no one to look after their daughter. E6 reported being unable to attend events, outreach or research activities as often as they would like. Although E28 was completing a placement in a setting where their situation was understood, they described difficulties taking part in additional activities and optional courses. Other participants said their involvement depended on the timing and duration of activities.

These accounts suggest that university participation extends beyond enrolment and class attendance. Access to wider academic experiences may depend on compatible schedules, transport and the availability of care. Some participants' presence was centred on compulsory activities, while other opportunities remained less accessible. Continued enrolment could therefore coexist with restricted participation in important aspects of university life.

The risk of interruption, academic performance and participation are related but distinct dimensions. Some participants assessed their performance positively while reporting that they had considered suspending their studies or could not take part in activities beyond classes; others described low performance assessments and attendance difficulties. Persistence cannot therefore be reduced to a binary distinction between remaining and leaving. The accounts point to processes of restriction, effort and reorganisation, shaped by care, income, work and academic support.

4.5 Institutional support, differential treatment and contrasting experiences

Fifteen participants (46.9%) reported differential treatment, indifference or a lack of support on the grounds of being a mother; another 15 (46.9%) answered negatively. One response (3.1%) was classified as mixed because it denied differential treatment in general but described a specific instance of a lack of understanding. Another (3.1%) mentioned feeling isolated because of age, without clearly attributing this to motherhood.

Table 2

Responses concerning differential treatment on the grounds of being a mother in the academic environment

Category	*n*	%
Report of differential treatment, indifference or lack of support	15	46.9
Negative response regarding perceived differential treatment	15	46.9
Mixed response: general denial and account of a specific incident	1	3.1
Account not clearly attributed to motherhood	1	3.1
Total	**32**	**100.0**

Note. Classification takes into account both the direct response and the explanation provided by the participant. Negative responses were not automatically interpreted as positive experiences, except where the participant also described support or respect. *Source:* Authors' analysis of the study data.

The accounts included different experiences. E1 associated failing a course with the period immediately after giving birth; E4 perceived that they had been passed over in placement selection after disclosing that they were a mother; E5 mentioned episodes of indifference; and E8 described being judged when they brought their daughters to class or when the children were ill. E26 said they did not feel supported, while E28 distinguished between their experiences with classmates and with some lecturers, who, they felt, expected them to "manage somehow". These accounts range from perceived discrimination or judgement to indifference and inadequate support.

Experiences could also vary across people and situations. E25 answered negatively to the question but reported that, although their classmates respected them when they brought their child, a lecturer made it clear that the university "isn't primary school". Because the participants had no one to look after the child, they stopped attending that lecturer's classes. This response was classified as mixed: a general negative answer coexisted with an account of an incident that restricted attendance. It illustrates why the full response matters, rather than coding only "yes" or "no", and why the same student may feel supported in some settings but encounter barriers in others.

Other participants described explicit support. E3 reported that classmates helped care for their daughter when they needed to bring her to class and spoke positively of a support space at the university. E19 said they were well supported by classmates and lecturers; E22 described lecturers as understanding when mothers and fathers brought their children to class; and E29 said classmates and lecturers had always welcomed their daughter in the classroom. These accounts describe concrete experiences of support, but do not establish that such conditions were available to all students or across all courses and activities.

The contrast between support and lack of understanding is consistent with Maluleke et al. (2023), who also found varied perceptions of institutional support among student mothers. Bitencourt (2019) situates these experiences within the broader question of whether universities recognise maternal responsibilities. In the present study, participants' accounts suggest that their ability to take part in

academic activities could depend on the responses they received in particular situations, such as bringing a child to class or seeking understanding in response to caring demands. The data do not permit an assessment of the institution as a whole, but they show uneven experiences of support.

The contrast also highlights the difference between support offered by individuals or groups and predictable institutional arrangements. Positive accounts demonstrate the value of practical support, while incidents of misunderstanding reveal the limits of relying on ad hoc negotiations. Vieira et al. (2019) discuss difficulties in implementing support for student mothers, while Lopes and Ramalho (2023) emphasise institutional responses aimed at supporting persistence. The findings point to a tension between localised support and the need for more consistent conditions; the responses do not establish the scope or implementation of UFPA policies.

4.6 Strategies for persistence

Participants described different ways of organising academic life alongside caring responsibilities, work and family life. These included planning schedules, completing tasks in advance, studying at alternative times, using travel time, drawing on digital resources, exchanging notes and course materials with classmates, and talking to lecturers. Such strategies helped participants continue their studies despite routines that did not always provide regular, protected periods for academic work.

Time management was a practical response to competing demands but should not be interpreted simply as an individual ability to “balance” every responsibility. Studying at night or in the early hours, using travel time and completing work during quieter periods were ways of adapting academic life to limited time. These practices could support persistence, while also showing that study was often fitted into whatever time remained after care, paid work and domestic tasks.

Classmates, relatives and lecturers also featured as sources of support. Sharing notes, asking for help to keep up with course material or negotiating academic demands could ease immediate obstacles, but depended on the availability and continuity of that support. Such interpersonal strategies complemented individual organisation without necessarily replacing stable arrangements for care, time and academic participation.

Some participants found it difficult to establish a study routine because their available time was insufficient or unpredictable. Planning was therefore not a universal solution: unexpected caring demands, work and children’s needs could disrupt schedules and planned study. Persistence depended not only on personal effort, but also on the practical possibility of setting aside time and obtaining support.

Some participants described motherhood as a source of motivation to continue their studies. They associated education with improving their living conditions, widening future prospects and providing better opportunities for their children. This resonates with Maluleke et al. (2023), who found that motherhood could involve both overload and motivation, and with Vieira et al. (2019), whose review

identified aspirations for a better life and the desire to complete a degree among factors supporting persistence. For some participants, a degree was both a personal project and a means of building what they saw as a better future for their family.

This motivation should not be romanticised or treated as compensation for overload. The meaning participants attached to education could sustain their decision to continue, but did not remove barriers involving time, income, transport or care. Hope for the future could coexist with present-day exhaustion and difficulty participating fully in academic life. The accounts thus show that motivation and distress were not mutually exclusive.

Overall, persistence was shaped by everyday strategies, available support and the reasons participants gave for continuing their studies. These practices demonstrate student mothers' agency, but also the limits of placing responsibility for persistence solely on them. A sociological analysis therefore shifts attention from individual resilience to the conditions that make continuation possible, more costly or uncertain.

5 Discussion

5.1 The sexual division of labour and overload

Participants' accounts of domestic work, childcare, paid employment and study reflect the sexual division of labour described by Kergoat (2009). When students report domestic work, ongoing childcare and the need to organise study around these tasks, the issue is not simply an excess of commitments. It is the persistence of a social structure that makes women primarily responsible for the everyday reproduction of life.

Federici (2017) shows how reproductive work, despite being essential to society, has historically been naturalised as women's responsibility and remains unpaid or inadequately remunerated. This perspective helps explain why university can offer women new opportunities without necessarily relieving them of existing responsibilities. Accounts of night-time study and reduced sleep also resonate with Bitencourt's (2019) discussion of the compression of women's time: meeting academic deadlines and caring for children can leave little room for self-care. Silva and Souza (2025) similarly show that dividing time and attention between care and study can have emotional consequences and affect academic trajectories. The overload reported here is therefore better understood as a social and gendered phenomenon than as a failure of individual organisation.

5.2 Support networks, childcare and persistence

Support networks shaped participants' opportunities to attend classes and complete academic activities. Those who reported absent, limited or intermittent support also described reduced attendance, difficulty participating and thoughts of suspending their studies. Vieira et al. (2019) highlight family support and university nurseries as emotional and practical resources. Lopes and Ramalho (2023)

broaden the concept of support to include financial and emotional assistance and direct care, while Silva and Souza (2025) identify a lack of childcare support, overload and discrimination as factors that can hinder student mothers' trajectories.

The accounts also raise the question of who performs care. Women relatives were frequently named, although partners, fathers and other relatives were also mentioned. This pattern is consistent with Kergoat's (2009) analysis: redistributing care may transfer reproductive work from one woman to another without challenging its association with femininity. A support network may help sustain academic participation while leaving the wider division of care largely unchanged.

Research in other contexts similarly identifies the role of family support and material resources in student mothers' trajectories (Bitencourt, 2019; Maluleke et al., 2023). The experiences reported at UFPA are consistent with these broader concerns, while also reflecting the distance and transport difficulties mentioned by participants. The findings do not establish that all participants faced the same barriers.

5.3 "Gender-blindness" in institutional practices

Some university rules and routines appear to assume that all students have the same amount of time and freedom to remain on campus. The scheduling of scholarships, placements and additional activities, attendance requirements and restrictions on children's presence may reflect what can be described as "gender-blindness": formal equality that overlooks inequalities in caring responsibilities. Bitencourt (2019) argues that Brazilian universities lack policies that directly recognise mothers' participation; Maluleke et al. (2023) similarly note that academic requirements can be organised around an "ideal student" with no responsibilities outside university.

The findings show that participants' experiences of treatment were divided: 46.9% reported differential treatment, indifference or a lack of support, while 46.9% answered negatively. This does not mean that half were satisfied and half were not. Some negative responses included accounts of specific incidents of misunderstanding, while positive experiences often depended on local initiatives rather than stable arrangements.

This distinction between contingent support and institutional rights is important. When persistence depends on personal negotiation rather than transparent procedures, students in similar situations may receive different responses. Vieira et al. (2019) note that formally established rights, such as the home-based study arrangements provided for pregnant students under Law No. 6,202/1975, may be poorly understood or not fully implemented. Maluleke et al. (2023) report similar concerns and describe recommendations for nurseries, support groups, workshops and financial assistance. Lopes and Ramalho (2023) also call for expanded student assistance and university nurseries. More consistent support would require accessible and transparent arrangements rather than relying solely on ad hoc solutions.

Law No. 6,202/1975 provides specific protections for pregnant students, but participants' reported needs extended beyond pregnancy and the postnatal period, encompassing childcare, therapy, transport

and the schedules of scholarships, placements and events. This suggests that policies for student mothers need to extend beyond temporary protection and recognise parenthood as an ongoing dimension of student persistence. Articles 22 and 23 of Law No. 14,914/2024 provide parental support spaces, while Article 2 of Law No. 14,925/2024 provides for adjustments to academic deadlines in specified circumstances (Brasil, 2024a, 2024b). The existence of these provisions does not guarantee their implementation, and the accounts analysed here cannot establish how they shape everyday practice at UFPA.

5.4 Persistence, performance and a broader conception of student success

Twenty-eight participants reported having considered or experienced some form of interruption. Since the questionnaire combined thoughts of leaving, past suspension and future intentions, this finding should not be read as a rate of attrition or actual suspension. It does, however, show how often continuation had been called into question in this group. Vieira et al. (2019), Bitencourt (2019) and Maluleke et al. (2023) likewise discuss how limited support and overlapping responsibilities can make continuation more difficult.

Some participants reported strong academic performance, scholarships or involvement in projects. Student success should therefore be understood more broadly: positive academic indicators may coexist with reduced sleep, limited leisure and the use of nearly all available time for study. Bitencourt (2019) describes how student mothers may sacrifice self-care, while Silva and Souza (2025) identify emotional effects associated with the division between care and study. Persistence with quality involves not only enrolment and grades, but also the opportunity to participate in university life without disproportionate strain.

Motherhood should not be interpreted solely in deficit terms. Maluleke et al. (2023) identify it as both a burden and a source of motivation. In the accounts from UFPA, children were sometimes described as a reason to persist and a degree as a possible means of improving future circumstances. Vieira et al. (2019) likewise identify hopes for improved income and the desire to complete a degree as factors supporting continuation. Recognising this agency does not shift responsibility for persistence onto individual resilience: participants' efforts cannot replace institutional support.

The findings also show that participation extends beyond attending classes. Some participants could attend compulsory classes but faced barriers to placements, research, outreach, events and optional courses. Continued enrolment could therefore coexist with restricted access to important aspects of university education. Taken together, the accounts show persistence as shaped by both individual agency and structural conditions. The challenges identified are consistent with research in other institutional and national contexts, while this study documents how they are experienced at a public university in the Brazilian Amazon.

6 Conclusion and implications for student retention policies

This study examined the challenges to persistence experienced by student mothers at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), focusing on their academic trajectories, caring responsibilities, support networks and perceptions of institutional responses. The findings show that paid and domestic work, childcare, financial constraints, travel and academic demands intersect in everyday life, shaping attendance, participation and continuation in higher education. Drawing on Kergoat (2009) and Federici (2017), these experiences can be understood as part of a gendered social organisation of care, rather than as private failures of personal organisation.

Participants used strategies such as studying at alternative times and reorganising tasks; some also reported reducing their rest. Although these practices demonstrate agency and determination, they do not show that conditions for persistence are adequate. As Bitencourt (2019) and Silva and Souza (2025) discuss, competing demands on time and the combination of care and study can carry personal and emotional costs. Persistence should therefore be considered not only in terms of enrolment or self-reported performance, but also in relation to the conditions under which students pursue their degrees and participate in university life.

Twenty-eight of the 32 participants (87.5%) reported having considered suspending or leaving their course. This figure indicates how often continuation had been called into question among respondents; it is not an attrition rate and cannot be generalised to all student mothers at UFPA. The accounts linked thoughts of interruption to combinations of caring responsibilities, absent or unstable support, financial constraints, paid work and limited academic participation. Persistence is therefore better understood as a process that may include interruption, restricted participation and continuing effort.

Support networks were important, but their presence did not guarantee regular or sufficient help. Relatives and care services could facilitate attendance and participation, while the distribution of care among women in the family could ease a student's burden without changing the gendered organisation of reproductive work. Ambiguous responses to the question about children's living arrangements and support also limited the characterisation of these networks. The findings should therefore be read as a description of the support explicitly reported, not as a comprehensive measure of its availability.

Participants' perceptions of institutional treatment varied. Some reported misunderstanding, indifference or difficulties related to their children's presence and care needs; others described support from classmates or lecturers. These accounts highlight the difference between localised acts of support and predictable institutional arrangements. They do not allow an assessment of UFPA's student assistance policy as a whole, but indicate that some participants perceived their ability to take part in academic activities as dependent on particular individuals' understanding.

The findings support consideration of institutional responses that recognise caring responsibilities as part of university life. Possible measures include expanding care services and spaces, strengthening financial support, making rights and procedures more widely known, establishing transparent criteria for academic flexibility where needed, and preparing university staff to respond to parental responsibilities. These are recommendations derived from participants' accounts and the literature, not an evaluation of

policies already implemented at UFPA or their effects. The existence of legal provisions concerning pregnant students, student assistance and parental support does not, by itself, establish how they are implemented or how effective they are in this context.

Accounts of children's therapy and other specific care needs indicate that family responsibilities may affect students' availability for classes and academic activities. Since the questionnaire was not designed to investigate disability, neurodivergence or children's diagnoses systematically, these accounts cannot establish the prevalence of such circumstances or support broader conclusions about them. They nevertheless point to the importance of considering the diversity of caring responsibilities without assuming that all student mothers face the same conditions.

This study has several limitations. The sample was voluntary and non-probability based, and is therefore not statistically representative of all student mothers at UFPA. The data were self-reported and cross-sectional; the study included neither a comparison group of students without children nor institutional records of academic performance, suspension or attrition. Although the questionnaire collected some sociodemographic information, these data were not analysed systematically to examine in depth the relationships between motherhood, race, class, age, territory and other dimensions. The wording of some questions—particularly the item combining children's living arrangements and support networks—also generated ambiguous responses and limited certain comparisons.

Future research could include students from different campuses and courses, combine questionnaires with in-depth interviews and academic records, and follow trajectories over time. It could also examine systematically how race, class, territory, working conditions and different arrangements for care intersect with persistence, while protecting participants' identities. Studies of institutional initiatives could assess their accessibility, continuity and contribution to academic participation.

In summary, participants drew on strategies, networks and future aspirations to continue studying, but did so under unequal conditions of time, care and access to resources. Understanding student mothers' persistence as an issue of equity shifts attention from individual effort to the social and institutional conditions that make higher education possible. The challenge is to build a university in which caring responsibilities are not treated as a purely private matter or turned into an obstacle to participation and academic continuation.

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