

## Research article

# Motherhood experiences of nurses receiving postgraduate education: A phenomenological research study

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Trying to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities as a student, nurse, and mother can be challenging due to pressures from overlapping time management. This study was conducted to explore the experiences of graduate students who work as nurses and are mothers.

**Methods:** The qualitative phenomenological data for this study were gathered from nurses at a training and research hospital between August and November 2022, utilizing face-to-face interviews. The study cohort comprised twelve nurses aged 28 to 48, all actively engaged in postgraduate education. Data were collected using a descriptive information form and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was executed through inductive coding, facilitated by the Max Qualitative Data Analysis (MAXQDA) Analytics Pro2022 software.

**Results:** Four central themes were developed: "Experiences During the Breastfeeding Process," "Positive Effects," "Encountered Challenges," and "Expectations."

**Conclusions:** The findings underscored that nurses who are mothers and pursuing postgraduate education encounter difficulties throughout their academic pursuits, notably attributed to working conditions and professional cultural values.

## 1. Introduction

Becoming a mother, one of the most important developmental periods in a woman's life is a dynamic and progressive process that continues throughout life. (Özkan and Polat, 2011; Don et al., 2014; Currie, 2009). The nursing profession is associated with the maternal role as a profession that encourages care and compassion and cares, nurtures, and educates. (Rodrigues et al., 2017; Souza et al., 2014). The nursing role is carried out on night shifts and public holidays and brings about difficulties for the nurse who is a mother and for the child (Souza et al., 2014).

Being a graduate student, nurse, and mother is challenging because it overlaps with multiple roles, responsibilities, and time management, which can become a source of stress, anxiety, and depression for student mothers (Concerto et al., 2017; Jang et al., 2017; Munn, 2017). Research has shown that graduate student mothers experience high levels of stress related to multiple tasks (Haynes et al., 2012; Giancola et al., 2009), feel

under pressure (Haynes et al., 2012; Giancola et al., 2009), and experience role conflict while attempting to be both a good student and a good parent (Haynes et al., 2012; Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

While the literature emphasizes the roles of nurses in health care, few studies describe the experiences of nurse mothers who are nurses and engaged in postgraduate education. This study was conducted to address this gap by exploring the experiences of graduate students who work as nurses and are mothers.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Study design

The current research is a qualitative phenomenological descriptive study conducted to describe the motherhood experiences of nurses engaged in postgraduate education. Phenomenological design represents a qualitative methodology that aims to investigate individuals'

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experiences in detail and reveal how they make sense of these experiences (Smith, 2004). In line with this definition, the purpose of the study is to describe in detail the motherhood experiences of nurses receiving postgraduate education by combining their subjective experiences, which are characteristic of the phenomenological design, with defining, interpreting, and explaining their experiences, characteristics of qualitative research.

## 2.2. Participants

Twelve participants who work as nurses in a training and research hospital in Turkey and are also mothers were enrolled in the study. The participants were recruited by homogeneous case sampling with the help of snowball or chain sampling methods (Yildirim and Şimşek, 2018). The individuals selected for the sample group were determined using the criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods. The snowball sampling approach proves effective in identifying individuals or situations that offer valuable insights into the researcher's problem. This process initiates with the question: "Who might be the most knowledgeable on this subject?" or "Who do you recommend I talk to regarding this issue?" The inclusion criteria were determined as follows: a) Being a nurse, b) Being a graduate (Master's or doctorate) student, and c) Volunteering to participate in the study. The participants were contacted in advance and briefly informed about the researchers and the study's subject and purpose. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study were contacted several times by phone to determine the date, time, and location of the interview.

## 2.3. Data collection tools

Data were collected between September 2021 and March 2022 using a descriptive questionnaire prepared by the researchers as a result of a literature review and a semi-structured interview form created by receiving expert opinion. The researchers who provided their expert opinion were three Assistant Professors and a Professor Doctor specialized in pediatric nursing with experience in qualitative research methods and Associate Professors in Journalism and Sociology.

### 2.3.1. Descriptive information form

The questionnaire prepared by the researchers contains 15 questions, especially about nurses' sociodemographic (such as questions about age, education, and employment status) information and breastfeeding duration.

### 2.3.2. Semi-structured interview form

A semi-structured interview form was used to reveal in depth nurses' experiences in the postgraduate education process. After ethics committee permission was obtained, the interview questions were sent to experts for their opinions on the subject. The interview form was evaluated after obtaining expert opinions, and the questions were revised in line with the recommendations. The interview questions and procedures were reviewed during the pilot study. The form contains eight open-ended questions, four main and four sub-questions. The form focuses on the feelings and thoughts of student nurses and includes the following open-ended questions:

1. What are your feelings about being a mother, a student, a wife, and an employee at the same time? Could you explain this?
2. Could you share your experiences as a student mother with us?
  - a. If you had the experience of breastfeeding your infant while you were receiving education, could you share it with us? (e.g., expressing milk, the duration of breastfeeding)
3. Could you share your experiences of being a working mother?
4. What are your experiences of being a student and working spouse? Could you explain this?

- a) What opportunities would you like to be offered at school?
- b) What opportunities would you like to be offered at work?
- c) What opportunities would you like to be offered in your social life?

## 2.4. Data collection

A pilot study was carried out with a graduate student nurse. After the pilot study, the questions were rearranged, and the final version of the interview form was created. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted online, via one-on-one video call, for them to be closer to the face-to-face interview technique. After the participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded, their verbal consent was received, and the interviews were audio recorded. The interviews were conducted by a single researcher experienced in qualitative research. Each interview lasted at least 60 min. When no new information was generated, the decision was made that saturation was reached and the data collection process was terminated with 12 participants.

## 2.5. Data analysis

The participants' sociodemographic data were presented in numbers. Interview data was created by transcribing approximately 12 h of audio recordings. Methodologically, an inductive coding method was followed using the program Max Qualitative Data Analysis (MAXQDA) Analytics Pro2022. After the first interview was transcribed, coding began, and data analysis was performed using iterative, consensus-based group coding and thematic analysis with expert opinion (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A codebook containing 43 codes and four themes was created in the first coding. As a group, the coding was compared during each transcription to improve the codebook. The first coding was done by one of the researchers. The total number of codes was reduced by discussing the first codebook with all researchers. Disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached, and the codebook was finalized with four themes and 16 codes.

## 2.6. Ethical aspect of research

Approval of 24 September 2021 and numbered 46,438 was obtained from the Non-invasive Clinical Research Ethics Committee of a university. After briefing participants on the study's objectives, ensuring the confidentiality of their responses, and specifying the usage and storage of the data, willing participants were incorporated into the study group.

Within the framework of the research ethics, the names of the participants were not used and the encodings in the interview texts were made as "P1, P2, P3...".

## 3. Results

Table 1 contains the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, all of whom were married and had breastfeeding experience.

At the end of the coding, four themes were developed concerning the motherhood experiences of nurses receiving postgraduate education (Fig. 1).

### 3.1. Experiences during the breastfeeding process

Most participants stated that they expressed and stored their breast milk and went home at every opportunity to breastfeed their infants. They experienced problems because they could not breastfeed during working hours, that they breastfed their infants while studying or preparing for the exam, and that they ceased breastfeeding earlier than they should have (Fig. 2).

**Table 1**  
Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Participant	Age	Postgraduate education attended	Marriage age	Her age at first pregnancy	Perception of the economic situation	Number of children	Ages of the children	Living situation in the city of study	Who takes care of your child while you are at school?	Duration of breastfeeding for the child/children
P1	36	Doctorate	25	26	Income exceeds expenses (good)	2	3 months old, 2 years old	No	My mother-in-law	3 months (currently), 6 months
P2	28	Doctorate	25	27	Income exceeds expenses (good)	1	1 years old	I was in a different city before, then I moved to the same city	My mother	8 months
P3	34	Master's program	22	24	Income exceeds expenses (good)	2	6 years old, 9 years old	Yes	Father/near neighbor/sometimes mother-in-law	2 years and 3 months, 2 years and 1 month
P4	36	Course-based master's program	24	26	Income exceeds expenses (good)	2	6 years old, 10 years old	No	Childminder	18 months, 24 months,
P5	37	Doctorate	28	29	Income equals expenses (medium)	2	4 months old, 8 years old	Yes	Childminder	5 years, 4 months (currently)
P6	35	Master's with thesis	27	29	Income equals expenses (medium)	1	6 years old	I was in a different city before, then I moved to the same city	My mother-in-law	2 years
P7	30	Master's with thesis	25	26	Income exceeds expenses (good)	1	3,5 years old	No	My mother	2.5 years
P8	35	Master's with thesis	22	24	Income equals expenses (medium)	2	3 years old, 10 years old	Yes	My mother-in-law, dry nursery	22 months, 18 months
P9	36	Master's with thesis	27	32	Income equals expenses (medium)	1	4 years old	Yes	My husband	23 months
P10	35	Course-based master's program	23	24	Income equals expenses (medium)	2	5 years old, 11 years old	Yes	Dry nursery	18 months, 24 months
P11	39	Doctorate	26	30	Income exceeds expenses (good)	1	9 years old	Yes	My husband and sister	4 months
P12	48	Doctorate	27	27	Income equals expenses (medium)	2	17 years old, 20 years old	No	Childminder	14 months, 14 months



Fig. 1. Themes determined in the study.

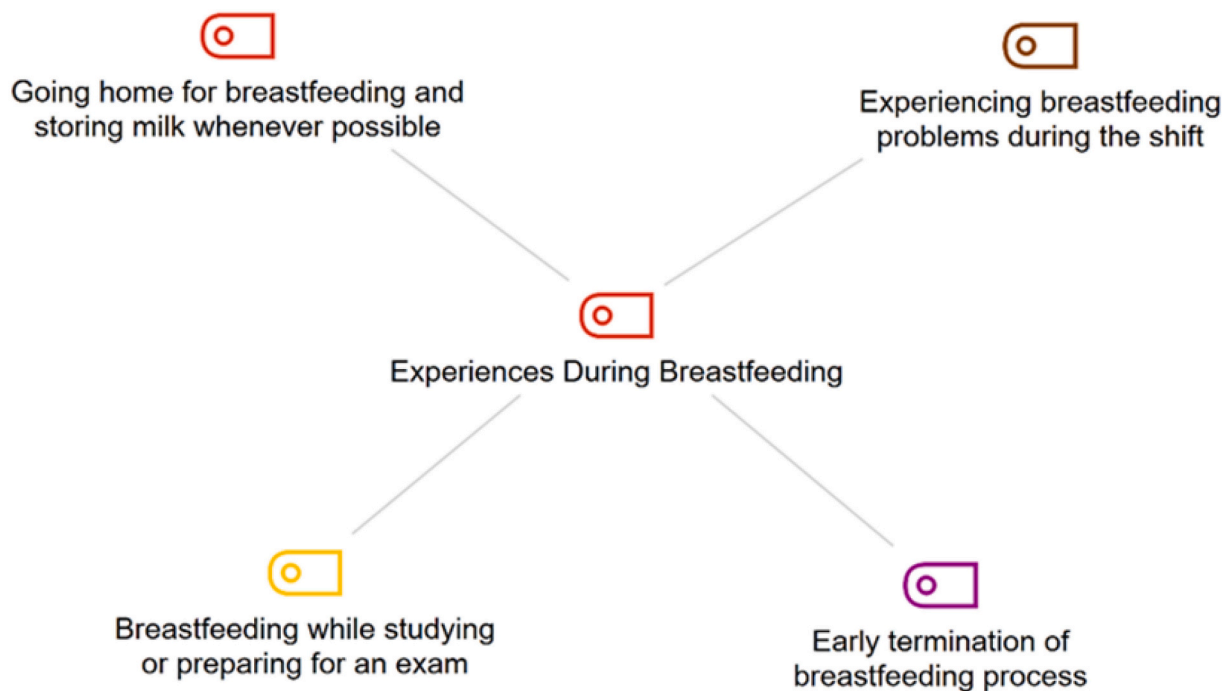


Fig. 2. Experiences of nurses receiving postgraduate education during the breastfeeding process.

“When I had my first child, I worked for 5 months, from the 6<sup>th</sup> until the 11<sup>th</sup> month. During that period, I expressed my milk, I worked at a private hospital and went home to breastfeed during breaks.”

(P3)

All participants who experienced problems because they could not breastfeed during working hours stated that their spouses or family members brought their infants to work so that they could breastfeed them. Some participants also said that because they could not find time to express their milk, their breast milk leaked out even through their uniform and they experienced pain since their breasts were engorged.

“Our house was near the hospital, so they could come often. But sometimes my breasts were so full that I remember when breast milk was leaking out through my uniform, or when I went to rest at night, I woke up with breast milk leaking out on the watch sheet. My breasts were hard as stone when I couldn’t breastfeed, and I still remember the pain I felt because of that”

(P12)

“I was constantly breastfeeding my baby while studying or preparing for the exam”

(P9)

“I was doing my master’s degree when my child was an infant, and breastfeeding could be short-term due to having to return to work or for other reasons. Inexperience, the stress of working in an intensive care unit, and the stress of receiving a master’s degree when I had my first baby and the requirements of starting a new job when I had my second baby may have caused breastfeeding to be short”

(P1)

### 3.2. Positive effects

Nurses receiving postgraduate education described the positive effects they experienced as being happy with the motivation of productivity, studying with their children, economic advantage, and increased spousal support (Fig. 3).

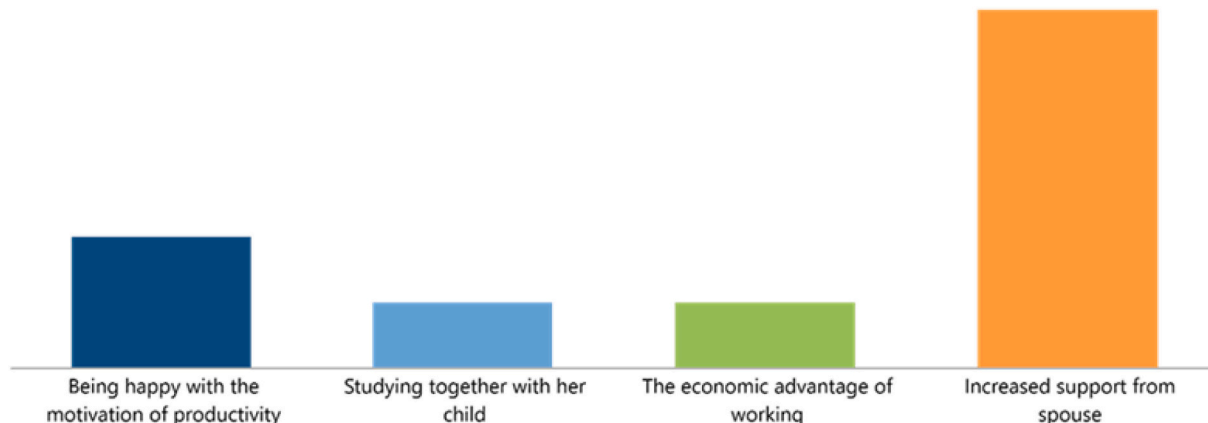


Fig. 3. Positive effects experienced by nurses receiving postgraduate education.

"Since I received the most support from my husband, he always compensated for my shortcomings during this process. He always supported me with love and respect and cared for the children on the days when I was busy."

(P5)

The participants said that they were happy to be productive as students and working mothers, that they observed they were more successful in their education life than their single friends, and that they felt like they had no responsibilities since they were students.

"Yes, it is difficult, but qualities such as being a mother and having a profession make people happy."

(P2)

It was found that the participants would not want to work if they would not experience economic difficulties. They said that they worked due to an economic advantage. The participants whose children attended school stated that they received support from their children regarding technology and were happy to share time with their children while studying together.

"We sometimes study together. Everyone studies in their own field, which is nice."

(P12)

### 3.3. Difficulties experienced

Participants said that they experienced the following difficulties during their postgraduate education: finding a caregiver for their children, receiving education in a different city, not being able to focus on classes, homework, and exams, insomnia and fatigue, fulfilling multiple roles at the same time, and soul-searching (Fig. 4).

They said that they were worried about being a good mother and felt a sense of inadequacy during this process. Participants explained that they could postpone their responsibilities concerning their roles as mothers, wives, and students, but they could not compromise on their roles as nurses.

"It's very difficult to be a mother, a student, a wife, and an employee. Your work is the only place you cannot compromise. You have watch duty at the hospital and patients you have to care for at work, the system cannot tolerate you ignoring these. But when you are a student, your homework may not be completed, your exam may be bad, or when your husband wants to go somewhere, you can say, 'I'm tired. Let's not go anywhere.'"

(P11)

Soul-searching was the second issue most mentioned by the participants. Neglecting their children since they had to go to work or study

caused the participants to feel remorse.

"It requires great responsibility and sacrifice. When I was on duty, I felt remorse because my child was staying at home without his mother at night, and sometimes I think that I was stealing the time I should have spent with my children due to work."

(P10)

Participants who breastfed at night, who preferred to work the night shift because they had classes during the day, or who had to work at night and take care of their children during the day, mentioned insomnia and fatigue. They stated that they could not spend effective time with their children because they were tired and that they had to do the work they had to do at night because they spent time with their children during the day.

"He wanted to be breastfed constantly at night, and when he was separated from the breast, he would cry and not sleep. I stopped sleeping at night for 23 months, but school and work continued during the day. I was wandering around with minimum sleep. In this way, I would get tired quickly, and my energy would decrease. Although I wanted to breastfeed for a longer time, I ceased breastfeeding at 23 months."

(P9)

They needed someone to look after their children both because they worked in shifts and in order to continue their education. Some participants had to take the exam with their children because they did not have anyone to leave them with.

"However, support from the spouse or family is very important. My husband did not support me at all because he worked very hard and regarded this as an arbitrary work. But my mother supported me and took care of the child."

(P7)

Studying in a different city from their place of residence also constituted a difficulty for the participants. They said that, in addition to being separated from their children, they experienced stressful situations such as accommodation, security, and the risk of transportation disruption.

"Being away from the children for the first time affected me a lot emotionally, especially in the beginning. Constant headache, always having your eyes on the phone... You are trying to relieve your longing with long-term video calls."

(P1)

### 3.4. Expectations

Participants expressed their expectations from the institutions where they continued their postgraduate education and where they worked

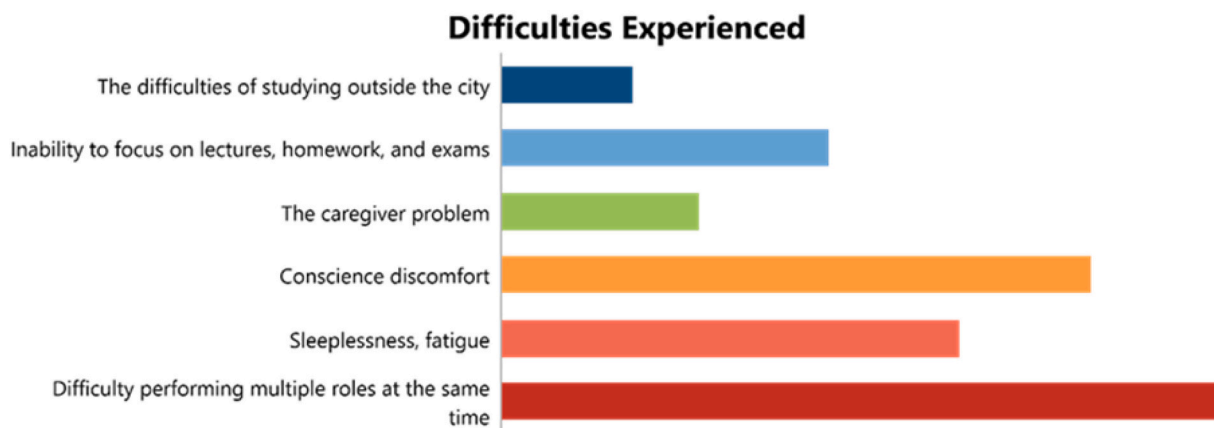


Fig. 4. Difficulties experienced by the participants during their postgraduate education.

and their families (Fig. 5).

The participants said that they expected freedoms such as flexible working hours from the institution they worked for, the possibility of a nursery at night provided by the institution, the right to paid leave, working without shifts, and working part-time until their children at least reach primary school age. The participants had expectations, such as nursery and additional time for the responsibilities students were asked to fulfil from the educational institution.

*"Extra time should be given if appropriate for the responsibilities given at school. There should be a care home close to the school, there should be space to breastfeed our child, and students who have children should be supported."*

(P3)

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1. Experiences during the breastfeeding process

Most participants with breastfeeding experience stated that they expressed and stored their breast milk and went home at every opportunity to breastfeed their infants, and that they experienced problems because they could not breastfeed during working hours. These problems are problems that any employee is likely to experience (Tewabe et al., 2017). Concerning their education, they said that they breastfed their infants while studying or preparing for the exam and ceased breastfeeding earlier than they should have. The fact that nurses continuing their postgraduate education stay away from their infants for longer periods of time during breastfeeding due to long working hours is among the most significant problems. As a result, those who could not breastfeed their infants indicated that their breast milk supply had stopped because the caregiver had fed their infants with formula. In the study conducted by Dachew and Biffitu in Ethiopia (2014), approximately half of the participants reported that their children were exclusively breastfed for the first 3 months or less. Although the mother's high level of education positively affects her breastfeeding attitude (Karanci, 2011), working as a nurse may prevent the maintenance of this attitude.

##### 4.2. Positive effects

For nursing students, motivation is an important determinant contributing to success (Çelik et al., 2014; Rose, 2011). In our study, participants stated that productivity motivated them. The fact that they felt more successful in comparison with single students suggests that they received support and motivation from their spouses. Scientific evidence demonstrates that positive interactions within the family provide

strength for resilience against stress (Pines et al., 2011).

In a study, women indicated that they were happy to receive support from their husbands and families in child care and home-related responsibilities. Unlike the results of the present study, it was stated that participants' postgraduate education gave them more professional self-confidence and they could integrate their new research skills and knowledge into practice (Groube, 2017). The reason why the aforesaid result was not observed in this study can be interpreted as the fact that nurses' postgraduate education and research are not attached sufficient importance and value in our culture and working conditions.

##### 4.3. Difficulties experienced

Postgraduate education affects family life (Skees, 2010). In a study, it was determined that the main problem for almost every participant was the difficulty of organizing child care, which was found to cause participants to experience anxiety (Bosch, 2013). Graduate nurses encounter numerous challenges in starting and maintaining their postgraduate education while continuing to work in addition to their roles as mothers and wives (Cooley, 2008). The participants in this study also stated that they had difficulty fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously. In his study, Groube (2017) reported that participants experienced time planning problems due to reasons such as attending classes and allocating time for research as a requirement of education, along with work and private life. Participants in the aforesaid study indicated experiencing extreme fatigue, stress, and insomnia, similar to the participants in this study.

Soul-searching was one of the important issues that the participants had difficulty with. In the studies, participants stated that they felt guilty for not always being with their children when they needed help and that their children felt excluded and neglected because they still had to work when at home (Havenga and Sengane, 2018; Essa, 2011).

A study identified the accommodation problem as an important problem for postgraduate students receiving education in a different city (Havenga and Sengane, 2018). However, in the present study, the longing for their children rather than the accommodation problem constituted a difficulty for the participants.

Students' relationships with their families and children may be adversely impacted during postgraduate education. Relationships with friends and extended family and social lives tend to be on hold during the postgraduate education program (Cooley, 2008). A study revealed that participants made plans in their minds about their education for the next day when they were with their families and, therefore, stated that they were in different places physically and spiritually (Clerehan et al., 2011). We found that the participants experienced difficulties in fulfilling multiple things simultaneously and felt helpless in caring for their children. The study by Clerehan et al. (2011) reported that participants'

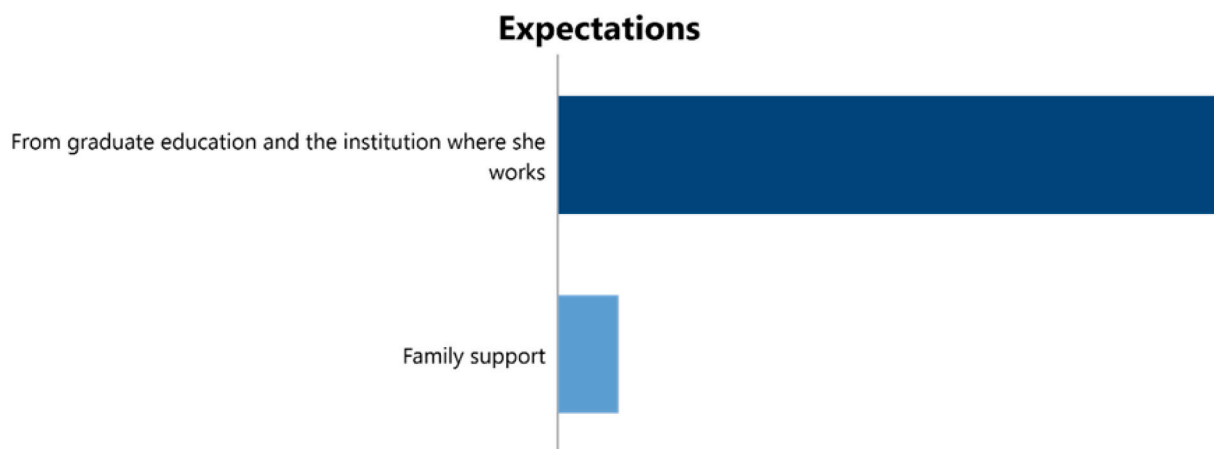


Fig. 5. The participants' expectations.

home life became a “challenge” without an extended family network, but they could continue their postgraduate education with support from their spouses and extended family members. It was stated that participants started studying a long time ago to succeed in exams since it would take time to study for exams and they had a challenging lifestyle. One of the difficulties experienced by the participants in this study was similarly related to focusing on lectures, assignments, and exams.

#### 4.4. Expectations

The right to paid leave was one of the nurses’ expectations from the workplace in this study. It seems appropriate for them to demand this right because they want to spend time comfortably on their education and postgraduate education also requires a cost. Employers’ reluctance to economically support postgraduate education creates disadvantages for nurses with low incomes or new families (Ng et al., 2016). A study showed that undergraduate nurses have to negotiate with their employers to continue postgraduate education (Richardson and Gage, 2010). Black and Bonner (2011) reported that nurses continuing postgraduate education had needs concerning issues such as economic problems, work permits, and social and emotional support, but it was especially difficult to obtain work permits and shift list requests from their workplaces (Black and Bonner, 2011). In a study from New Zealand, it is known that there is a financing institution (Health Workforce New Zealand (HWNZ)) that provides economic support for nurses who receive postgraduate education, or that their education expenses can be refunded from the institution they work for after their education is completed (Groube, 2017). In this case, requesting paid leave by the participants in the current study during their postgraduate education is not unfair. Some of the participants’ requests for support during their postgraduate education in the study were from their family of origin, particularly concerning the care of their children. The fact that the participants in the study by Groube (2017) received significant support from their families to allocate time and space to prepare for their assignments and exams justifies the demands of the participants in the current study.

A study determined that participants needed a childcare home or nursery for their preschool-aged children on the campus where they received education and they were waiting for admission to the nursery since there was a quota. Affordable and accessible daycare is crucial for women who want to study while rearing their children (Bosch, 2013).

#### 5. Conclusion

Four themes were created in this study, “Experiences during the breastfeeding process, Positive effects, Difficulties experienced, and Expectations.” The importance of supporting women in their roles and responsibilities in a happy family environment is clearly observed for nurse mothers to be able to continue their education after graduation. Although nurse mothers encountered difficulties while balancing the family, school, and workplace, completing their postgraduate education gave them a sense of accomplishment and success.

The notion that women are the heroes of housework, home/family care, and child-rearing is still common. Although men or other partners support family routines in some societies, responsibility for the care of the home and children is irrevocably associated in many countries with the female figure. While it is impossible to compromise with the workplace or nursing duties, the family duties (spouse, children) can be compromised. Hence, the support of a spouse, other family members, and caregivers plays an important role in maintaining school life. It should be remembered that women use their performance at the highest level while fulfilling their responsibilities in the healthy execution of all these processes.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Elif Erbay Ozdede:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Hamide Zengin:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Oznur Tiryaki:** Writing – review & editing, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nursan Cinar:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

#### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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