

**A comparative study of the worklife balance experiences and coping mechanisms of Nigerian and British single student-working mothers**

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**A Comparative Study of the Work-Life Balance Experiences  
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Table 1: Participants’ Demographic Profile

Name	Age	No of Dependent Children	No of Dependent Adults	Academic Level/Type	Employment Type	Nationality
Focus Group 1						
Participant 1	29	2	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 2	42	2	1	UG/PT	FT	British
Participant 3	25	1	1	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 4	35	2	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 5	35	4	0	UG/PT	FT	British
Participant 6	27	1	0	UG/FT	FT	British
Participant 7	31	3	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 8	47	3	1	PG/PT	PT	British
Participant 9	34	2	0	PG/PT	PT	British
Participant 10	22	1	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Focus Group 2						
Participant 1	30	2	1	UG/FT	PT	Nigerian
Participant 2	41	2	2	PG/FT	PT	Nigerian
Participant 3	38	2	0	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 4	30	1	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 5	43	3	2	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 6	39	2	0	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 7	21	1	0	UG/FT	PT	Nigerian
Participant 8	26	2	1	UG/PT	PT	Nigerian
Participant 9	38	1	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 10	47	3	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Focus Group 3						
Participant 1	31	2	0	UG/FT	FT	British
Participant 2	26	1	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 3	44	3	1	PG/FT	PT	British
Participant 4	37	2	0	PG/PT	FT	British
Participant 5	24	1	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 6	41	2	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 7	34	2	1	PG/FT	PT	Nigerian

Participant 8	40	3	2	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 9	44	3	0	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 10	35	2	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
<b>Note:</b> Full-Time (FT); Part-Time (PT); Undergraduate (UG); Postgraduate (PG)						

**Table 2: Emerging Themes with Indicative Quotations**

Research inquiry	Indicative quotations	First-order codes	Codes consolidation and conceptual categories	Main themes
Work-life balance experiences of single student-working mothers	<p>It is always difficult for me to handle all these commitments because one of them is always likely to suffer at the expense of others... (Focus Group 2, Participant 4)</p> <p>The cost of living in the UK is high, now imagine being the only one paying those bills and then going to school, and taking care of the kids. To be honest, that's a lot for one person to handle. (Focus Group 1, Participant 9)</p>	Multiple work-life roles, conflict between roles, deteriorating health and well-being, role pressure from family and friends, new confusing roles, role identification, role adjustment	<p>Inter-role conflict</p> <p>Role ambiguity</p> <p>Role strain</p> <p>Role overload</p> <p>External role pressures</p>	<b>Multiple role challenges</b>
Coping mechanisms adopted by single student-working mothers	<p>My family is supportive and always there for me whenever I need them to help look after my children, even though my dad indirectly keeps saying that I should get married and let a man do a man's duties (Focus Group 2, Participant 1).</p> <p>In my opinion, the support I get from my family to look after my kids is very limited because you must also consider that they also have their respective jobs to keep... (Focus Group 1, Participant 7)</p>	Support from family members, close relatives, and friends, spirituality and religious events	Individual initiatives	<b>Role-combining coping mechanisms</b>

	<p>Flexibility in my workplace is very limited... You either work part-time, earn low pay, and be scared that you might lose your job, or you work full-time and keep your job. (Focus Group 2, Participant10)</p> <p>Depending on the number of commitments I have, I can pick between working part-time and full-time. There is nothing particularly troubling about my job because it is considerably flexible. (Focus Group 1, Participant 3)</p>	<p>Flexible work arrangements (e.g. part-time work, compressed work hours, job sharing and shift work), apprenticeships</p>	<p>Organisational provisions</p>	
	<p>Government support is available because different schemes and benefits can help foot some of the bills, even though sometimes it can be challenging... (Focus Group 3, Participant 1)</p> <p>Support from the government? There is nothing like that. Everyone is aware that the Nigerian government does not prioritise issues like these. (Focus Group 2, Participant 2)</p>	<p>Childcare support, adult care homes, student loans, after-school and breakfast clubs, apprenticeship, universal credit, and housing benefits</p>	<p>Government provisions</p>	

## **A Comparative Study of the Work-Life Balance Experiences and Coping Mechanisms of Nigerian and British Single Student-Working Mothers**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Recent gender-related research has focused on how gender affects work-life balance, particularly whether men and women have similar difficulties balancing work and family demands. However, to broaden WLB research beyond its concentration on employees to a different population, this study investigates the work-life balance experiences of single student-working mothers.

**Methodology** – This article uses a qualitative study using three focus groups to compare Nigerian and British single student-working mothers' work-life balance experiences and coping strategies or mechanisms adopted in these two contexts.

**Findings** – Our findings indicate that, regardless of nationality, single student-working mothers are affected by inter-role conflict, role ambiguity, role strain, role overload, and external role pressures, which make achieving work-life balance a herculean task. Nevertheless, given the different political, economic, and socio-cultural landscapes of the two countries, the extent to which the aforementioned factors impact single student-working mothers varies and influences the range of coping mechanisms adopted in the two contexts.

**Practical implications** – The insights gleaned from this study suggest that there are huge challenges for single student-working mothers in terms of achieving work-life balance due to their status as students, workers, and mothers. Combining these roles negatively affect their work-life balance and level of productivity and effectiveness, at home, at work, and at University. This poses a significant implications for human resources structures, policies, and practices. We suggest that single student-mothers should learn from their counterparts' experiences and coping mechanisms, and that organisations and government should also

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provide adequate support to help them combine their challenging roles. This would ease the tension associated with combining multiple roles and enhance their wellbeing and work-life balance.

**Originality/value** – The study calls for a re-examination of WLB policies and practices at organisational and national levels to ensure that single student-working mothers are well supported to enhance their productivity and WLB.

**Keywords:** work-life balance, coping mechanism, gender, single student-working mothers, role theory, Nigeria, Britain

**Introduction**

Recent decades have seen a continued focus on work-life balance (WLB) among academics and professionals, with discussions focusing on its definition, nature, reality, dynamics, and complexity. Furthermore, a corpus of research has examined WLB from a gendered perspective in a variety of contexts (Burnett et al., 2010; James, 2014), with many of these studies concentrating on the difficulties women face in achieving WLB. But little is known about the WLB of single student-working mothers, particularly how they manage multiple demands like schoolwork, paid work, and childcare obligations (Smith et al., 2020). In reality, many people find themselves in uncharted waters when attempting to cope with the difficulties of juggling various duties, especially when they have to undertake these tasks by themselves (Gatrell et al., 2013).

The Institute for Women’s Policy Research discovered in 2019 that single mothers who are enrolled in school devote more time to childcare, housework, and paid employment and less time to their education and essential self-care activities like sleep and exercise. Additionally, to succeed academically, single mothers must properly juggle their household, academic, and

other non-work responsibilities (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2019). Consequently, it is essential to broaden WLB research beyond its concentration on employees to a different population – single student-working mothers. Existing work-life studies still have a great deal to learn about single student-working mothers. The lack of research on this group is a challenge since it limits the usefulness and applicability of the body of knowledge in this area by introducing 'blind spots', as highlighted by Ozbilgin et al. (2011).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the WLB experiences of single student-working mothers. Specifically, we compare Nigerian and British single student-working mothers to examine the varying experiences and coping strategies/mechanisms adopted in these two contexts. This study contributes to the existing literature on WLB in several ways. First, by conducting a qualitative study, we add to the scant empirical literature on the WLB of single student-working mothers to further our knowledge of the experiences and challenges associated with obtaining WLB. Second, by comparing research from developing (Nigeria) and developed (Britain) countries, we demonstrate the variability of WLB experiences and coping mechanisms driven by different political, economic, and socio-cultural factors. The results of this study will also help single student-working mothers learn from their counterparts' experiences and coping mechanisms, which may be beneficial for them when balancing their work and non-work lives. Third, we draw on role theory to explain how single student-working mothers manage their multiple and overlapping roles, including being a student, single-parent (mother), caregiver, and worker. Role theory starts with a set of normative expectations that are assumed to determine specific roles or statuses in social structure and their accompanying responsibilities or actions in interactions with others (Vandenberghe et al., 2017).

The article is organised as follows. We provide a brief explanation of WLB in the next section. Following this section is a brief review of role theory concerning single student-working mothers. This is followed by an explanation of the research methods and a presentation of the



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findings. The findings are then discussed, followed by a conclusion, an explanation of the limitations of the study, recommendations, and an agenda for further research.

**Work-Life Balance in Context**

The concept of WLB is further supported by recent changes in the makeup of the workforce. This is because as more women enter the workforce and dual-income households become more prevalent, both men and women attempt to strike a balance between their professional and personal lives (Karkouliau et al., 2016). While there are several contentions to what WLB means or how it is defined, the common notion is that WLB relates to an individual’s ability to successfully manage the relationship between the work and non-work aspects of their lives (Wheatley, 2012). The terms ‘work’ and ‘life’ have also been subjected to several debates regarding what constitutes work and life. Notably, Kelliher et al. (2019) argue that the concept of work and life has been primarily constrained to the conventional forms of work and non-work activities – without accounting for other recent changes in working arrangements, employment relationships, and care obligations (including childcare, eldercare, care for disabled persons, and care of those with chronic illnesses).

As Kelliher et al. (2019) note, four key research areas have emerged from the existing literature. First, there is a corpus of studies that looks at how well individuals manage their personal and professional lives on an individual basis. This research has primarily shown that having a healthy WLB improves a person’s wellbeing (Felstead and Henseke, 2017; Bhende et al., 2020). This is due to the ‘buffering effect’, which shields people from negative experiences in either domain and may lessen the stress brought on by role conflict (Kelliher et al., 2019). Second, much research has looked at how company policies and practices, such as flexible work schedules, smart working, workload reviews, wellbeing plans, and increased managerial acknowledgement and support for diversity, among others, might help workers attain a more

satisfying WLB (Agosti et al., 2017; Feeney and Stritch, 2019). Third, research into the causes or antecedents of WLB has attracted much attention throughout the years. There is evidence that workplace factors, including hours worked, work culture, work expectations, and managerial support, affect how employees perceive their ability to reconcile work and family demands (Prowse and Prowse, 2015; Haar and Brougham, 2022). Fourth, the integration of work and life has been a subject of increasing attention. This integration relates to the degree to which demands from various domains could clash or interfere with one another as well as the possibility that one domain might enhance the other (Kelliher et al., 2019). As a result, several WLB theories have been developed to explain the interaction between the two life domains. The most well known of these are border, boundary, segmentation, role/inter-role, enrichment, and spillover theories. Furthermore, we aver that individual coping mechanisms are crucial components of the study of balancing work and non-work life demands; for example, spousal support, relational assistance, childminders, setting boundaries, and individuals' internal and external locus of control (Karkoulou et al., 2016; Adisa et al., 2021). In addition, recent research by Adamson et al. (2022) also changed the focus from asking 'how' to asking 'why' people are so committed to pursuing a specific type of WLB. They create the notion of the 'gendered project of the self' to theorise WLB, demonstrating how WLB was more than just a time or role management technique; instead, pursuing WLB in a particular way was found to be crucial for achieving and sustaining a specific desired subjectivity or sense of self as a better person, better employee, or better parent. According to the results of their study, it is possible to comprehend the processes by which gendered social and cultural expectations affect how both men and women can and desire to pursue their WLB goals by conceptualising WLB as the gendered project of the self. Although their study was based on a case study of senior managers in Denmark, its conclusions may be applicable in other contexts.

In particular, the majority of recent gender-related research has focused on how gender affects WLB, particularly whether men and women have similar levels of difficulties balancing the demands of work and family or whether males may really experience some form of benefit (Karkoulia et al., 2016). It is important to mention that even though the problem of WLB affects both genders, female employees suffer the most negative effects of the necessity to juggle work and home responsibilities (Adisa et al., 2016). For a variety of reasons, women work for a living. While some women work to improve their family's financial situation, others do so to experience the self-fulfilment and self-independence that come with a paid job. Some women's household duties are, nevertheless, intrusively affected by their work (Burnett et al., 2010; Adisa et al., 2016). For instance, current research shows that British working women endure a higher proportion of housework and more negative spillovers than men, leading to unrestrained role conflict, which is further worsened by the structural and interactional responsibilities that women take on (Wheatley, 2012; Adisa et al., 2021). Nigerian women, on the other hand, in addition to the challenges experienced by British working women, are impacted by patriarchal inclinations and task-pay inequity, which cause work-life stress and work-life conflict for the majority (Adisa et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, there is scant literature on single student-mothers' WLB, students' WLB, student-life stress, and student-family conflict. Throughout their academic careers, students must use their available resources to manage a range of commitments, including those pertaining to their families, personal lives, religion, social responsibilities, academic requirements, and environmental circumstances (Smith et al., 2020). Below, using role theory, the WLB of single student-working mothers is examined, taking into account their numerous roles as students, employees, and single mothers, as playing multiple roles might result in role conflict.

## Conceptual Framework – Role Theory and Single Student-Working Mothers

Role theory provides that people take on various roles daily because social systems (specifically societies, cultures, organisations, groups, and families) are structured and run by means of socially identified roles (Biddle, 1986). Therefore, this present research is grounded in role theory to explain how single student-working mothers manage multiple and overlapping roles, including being a student, single parent (mother), caregiver, and worker. Role theory's central tenet is that specific roles are connected to expectations, norms, and duties that produce behaviour that encourages compliance (Vandenberghe et al., 2017). Role theory also asserts that normative expectations encourage people to act in certain ways that are consistent with their roles (Evans, 2017). In this study's context, single student-working mothers must manage the several roles, responsibilities, and expectations that come with balancing their education, paid work, and childcare responsibilities. Consequently, for single student-mothers to effectively take on these various roles, they must identify with the roles. They are more likely to internalise a position and see it as an extension of the self – the stronger their identification with the role(s), the more importance they place on it (them) (Ashforth et al., 2000; Cain et al., 2018).

In addition, role theory presupposes two crucial approaches: structural and interactional. On the one hand, the structural approach defines a role as a collection of (internal and external) standards by which individuals are assessed or evaluated based on compliance with the standards (Turner, 2001). For instance, in the case of women, unlike many egalitarian societies (e.g. Britain) where gender roles are driven by equality, most patriarchal societies (e.g. Nigeria) believe that women's roles are primarily restricted to being a (house)wife, mother, and caregiver; hence, women in these societies are guided or forced to conform by the structures that have been implemented, which are created and influenced by socio-cultural norms (Adisa et al., 2021). On the other hand, the interactional approach defines a role as a comprehensive

pattern of behaviours and attitudes connected with a certain identity or entity performed by several people (Turner, 2001). Therefore, besides the socio-cultural norms and structures that influence how and why people assume roles, innate psychological qualities and cognitive features may also have an impact on role-taking (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 1999). For instance, women are traditionally given the responsibility of caring and domestic home duties since they have been shown to have more nurturing qualities than males, as well as having higher degrees of compassion, orderliness, and empathy than men (Uppalury and Bhaskar, 2014). Nevertheless, roles are considered collections of identity-related expectations that vary in their substantiality and consistency, such that people act according to how they interpret these linked roles (Biddle, 1986).

Furthermore, in addition to role expectations, roles also depend on the environment in which they are performed, the requirements of the position, the consensus surrounding the role, and the abilities connected with role acceptance (Adisa et al., 2021). In the case of single student-working mothers, they must become accustomed to different roles and their requirements. For instance, as students, they are primarily expected to develop intellectual skills that ensure academic success; as employees, they are expected to ensure a collection of workplace skills (such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills) for career success; and as (single) mothers, they must have the necessary nurturing skills to deal with their childcare responsibilities alone. Consequently, even while role theory suggests that individuals adjust their behaviour to fit new roles as they take them on, given that various roles have distinct temporal and behavioural requirements, these roles may be fundamentally incompatible, resulting in inter-role conflict (Turner, 2001; Vandenberghe et al., 2017). Inter-role conflict arises when one role's demands are incompatible with other demands and negatively affect health and wellbeing (Wilson and Baumann, 2015).

Moreover, there is sufficient evidence that assuming multiple roles can cause stress, particularly when those roles collide and cause inter-role conflict (Karkouliau et al., 2016; Akanji et al., 2020). Additionally, inter-role conflict across the spheres of work, family, and school has generated a significant body of research. Due to their need to internalise the concept of the ideal student, ideal worker, and intensive mothering responsibilities, women frequently face inter-role conflict. In reality, studies contend that there are several role conflicts experienced by women who combine work, school, and family. These include school-to-work, work-to-school, school-to-family, family-to-school, work-to-family, and family-to-work conflicts (Giancola et al., 2009; Markle, 2015). Due to these conflicts, women are unable to fully accomplish the demands of their multiple roles due to the performance expectations attached to them and often become trapped in a ‘cycle of guilt’ – they feel guilty about neglecting any of the roles for another (Markle, 2015; Smith et al., 2020).

Therefore, this study aims to elaborate on the experiences and coping mechanisms of Nigerian and British single student-working mothers to identify coping mechanisms that have proven efficient and can be replicated by working mothers in either of the countries. This study also aims to provide single student-working mothers and human resource managers with strategic insights for achieving the desired WLB.

## Methodology

Most of the current WLB research is based on the positivist paradigm and utilises quantitative study techniques (Beigi et al., 2017). Therefore, situated within an interpretive paradigm and employing a qualitative research approach, this study is based on the notion that WLB experiences are socially constructed through interaction with others (Boiarintseva and Richardson, 2019), especially given the influence of the multiple roles among single student-working mothers. Qualitative approach has breadth and depth, which helps to demonstrate

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rigour and relevance in a study (Richardson et al., 2022). It helps researchers and readers to understand the “meaning created through evolving relationships...and helps to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ experience through first-hand accounts, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, interviews, and narratives (Blustein et al., 2005, p. 356). Therefore, using a qualitative approach enable us to examine in depth the WLB experiences and coping mechanisms of single student-working mothers rather than rely on numerical responses obtained through quantitative research. Our study thus contributes to qualitative research in the field of WLB and career scholarship.

We used purposive sampling, considering the notion that qualitative researchers should have good knowledge of the sample size to be utilised and target the intended samples (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling is primarily based on the defined characteristics of the research participants – single student-working mothers. We applied a snowballing strategy to recruit key participants through our personal networks and recommendations (Saunders et al., 2019). Thus, each participant’s eligibility was primarily based on their gender (females), academic level (undergraduates and postgraduates), employment status (paid employment), and relationship status (single mothers). The other demographic features that we considered include the number of dependent children (at least one), the number of dependent adults (not mandatory), and employment type (full or part time). A detailed demographic profile is presented in Table 1.

Following the recruitment of the participants, we organised the participants into three focus groups of 30 total participants. Robson (2002) suggests a focus group should have between 8 and 12 participants. Thus, the first focus group comprised ten British participants, there were ten Nigerian participants in the second focus group, and there were ten participants (five British and five Nigerian participants) in the third focus group. We deliberately combined British and Nigerian participants in the third focus group to enable us to uncover the differences and similarities in the WLB experiences and coping mechanisms adopted that may not have been



uncovered in the first two groups. Moreover, we used focus group discussions because rather than using data from a statistically representative sample of a larger population, focus groups provide a deeper understanding of societal issues (e.g. WLB) by using data from a purposefully chosen group of people (Ochieng et al., 2018). Each focus group was subjected to a semi-structured discussion with the researchers acting as ‘facilitators’ or ‘moderators’ to guide the conversation among the participants. Although focus groups have been criticised for being dominated by group dynamics and power structures, which determine who talks when and how much (Cowton and Downs, 2015), the method gives the participants the chance to share their own observations and learn from others’ insights. For instance, through their interactions, participants were able to share and learn from others’ WLB experiences and gain insights into the coping strategies utilised by others. Additionally, the researchers were able to elicit debate, promote interaction, and motivate participants to lessen the impacts of group dynamics and power hierarchies across the groups by utilising pre-specified and open-ended questions.

***Insert Table 1 about here***

The discussions were facilitated and recorded via video-conferencing platforms (Microsoft Teams and Zoom), making it much easier to communicate with participants from around the UK and Nigeria without the need for travel. Each semi-structured focus group discussion lasted for 90-120 minutes. Informed consent was obtained from participants beforehand. The consent forms assured them of the anonymity and confidentiality of the information they would be divulging, and this assurance was carried out by ascribing pseudonyms to the participants to replace their real names with numbers (e.g. Focus Group 1, Participant 1). The discussions covered the primary research areas, including the WLB experiences of the participants and the coping mechanisms adopted by the participants to manage multiple roles.



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After the interviews were complete, the authors transcribed them and subjected them to a thematic analysis procedure (TAP) to determine the key themes based on the interpretation and analytical conclusions led by our study purpose. TAP is a qualitative design used in research to find, examine, and report patterns (themes) within datasets (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, in accordance with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic process, each researcher began by familiarising themselves with the transcribed data, which involved careful repeated readings of the data. Thereafter, the data was colour coded to match words, phrases, and sentences with related meanings. By collaboratively coding the data, we facilitated inter-coder reliability by ensuring consistency in the coding procedure until all authors reached a consensus (O’Connor and Joffe, 2020). This process prompted a pattern-based analysis, by which patterns in the data pertinent to the study objective and those that were surprising facts are found (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Then, after reviewing and finalising the patterns, we searched for themes. To develop provisional themes and sub-themes pertinent to the study objective, the authors focused on the patterns that we already discovered and connections that appeared in the coded data. The major themes were finalised after meticulously viewing and reworking the themes while continually looking over the data. Table 2 presents a detailed summary of how we determined the themes and sub-themes.

**Findings**

This study examines the WLB experiences of single student-working mothers and, in particular, compares the experiences of single student-working mothers in Nigeria and Britain to better understand the differences in the experiences and coping mechanisms used in the two settings. Following the data analysis, two main themes emerged. The first theme, ‘multiple role challenges’, presents a broad view of the challenges encountered by single student-working mothers in combining and managing multiple roles. The second theme, ‘role-combining coping mechanisms’, presents the three main coping mechanisms utilised by single student-working

mothers in Nigeria and Britain for dealing with multiple roles: individual initiatives, organisational provisions, and government provisions. Ultimately, we identified similarities and variations in the WLB experiences and coping mechanisms utilised by single student-working mothers in both countries.

*Insert Table 2 about here*

### **Multiple Role Challenges**

While the majority of WLB studies that are based on gender, especially those that concentrate on women's WLB, contend that women engage in paid work for a variety of reasons, including the improvement of their family's financial situation and their desire to experience the self-fulfilment and self-independence that come with a paid job (Burnett et al., 2010; Adisa et al., 2016), our findings show that single student-working mothers are no different, but in their case, their options are frequently limited because they have to bear work and family burdens alone. Regardless of their nationalities, we discovered that most participants experienced inter-role conflict due to managing the numerous work-life roles and duties that must be accomplished concurrently:

If WLB is a thing, then I guess it's not meant for me. It is difficult to manage work, childcare, and school alone because it is daunting. I barely ever have time for myself since I have to get up early to get the kids ready for school, get ready for work, and attend to schoolwork. It's a heavy weight to bear alone, as I'm sure everyone here [referring to other focus group members] can attest. (Focus Group 1, Participant 5)

It is extremely taxing...the load is too much to carry alone. Since my husband passed away, I've had to fill the 'fatherhood shoes' coupled with motherhood duties and care for my elderly mother, who still lives with us. These are all harmful to my wellbeing. (Focus Group 2, Participant 9)

The above quotes demonstrate that many of the participants have experienced role overload and strain arising from a combination of multiple and overlapping roles (e.g. work, childcare,

eldercare, and education) beyond their personal resources, which are limited because they are handling these responsibilities alone. Inter-role conflict due to role overload and strain has made it challenging for many participants to achieve WLB.

Additionally, being exposed to role ambiguity was a worry voiced by the majority of the younger participants, particularly those in their early 20s, in both countries. Many of them encountered a learning curve since they found it challenging to identify with the multiple roles quickly:

Yes, like she [Focus Group 1, Participant 10] said, it's still a learning curve for me. I have to deal with being a young single mother and carrying all these burdens... Sometimes, I'm overwhelmed and get lost in what I'm expected to do, and this comes with the pressure from family and relatives, who think that I have to play the role of a father and mother simultaneously. (Focus Group 1, Participant 1)

Another older participant in Focus Group 1 offered a suggestion to the younger participants:

I can relate to your situation. At 22, I became a single mother, and I can attest that it wasn't a bed of roses. However, even if it takes some time, you must first accept the circumstances and identify with your many roles. At the end of the day, you don't want to wind up berating yourself for being a bad parent or employee. (Focus Group 1, Participant 8)

There was a sense of agreement among other group members with this advice. For the most part, it is consistent with Adamson et al.'s (2022) concept of the 'gendered project of the self' in that pursuing WLB in a certain manner is essential to obtaining and maintaining a specific desired subjectivity or sense of self as a better person, employee, or parent. Therefore, achieving WLB may require single student-working mothers to adjust to new roles and demands.

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3 In addition to the worries that come with being a young single mother, most participants gave  
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5 accounts of the external pressure from family, friends, and relatives on the expectations  
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7 regarding their various roles. However, our analysis shows that Nigerian single student-  
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9 working mothers experience higher external role pressures than their British counterparts. The  
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11 quotations below are representative of their shared opinions:  
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15 In my opinion, as Nigerian women, our families put a lot of pressure on us and have  
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17 high expectations of us. My mother once told me, 'I think you should remarry and  
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19 move on with your life. You don't want people thinking of you as promiscuous'.  
20  
21 So being a single mom might be labelled a stigma because you will be called all  
22  
23 sorts of names. (Focus Group 3, Participant 7)  
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25 To buttress the above comment, another participant remarked:

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27 Going by the experiences that I have heard everyone share, asking respectfully, don't you  
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29 think that as Nigerians, we might be facing higher pressures from family and friends than  
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31 you British are? (Focus Group 3, Participant 8)  
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34 Four of the five British group members who answered Participant 9's question appeared to  
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36 concur that single student-working mothers must deal with varying degrees of external  
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38 demands, with Nigerian single student-working mothers facing the most of them. Regardless,  
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40 these external pressures are consistent with the core assumption of role theory: roles are linked  
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42 to normative responsibilities, expectations, and obligations that motivate people to act in  
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44 certain ways that are compatible with their roles (Evans, 2017; Vandenberghe et al., 2017).  
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46 Additionally, it is consistent with the structural approach of role theory, as shown by our  
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48 findings, which reveal that the roles associated with single student-working mothers are pre-  
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50 established social structures that require people to fit into them (Turner, 2001) or face  
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52 stigmatisation, as is the case in this study.  
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## Role-Combining Coping Mechanisms

### *Individual Initiatives*

There were accounts of specific individual actions taken by the participants in each of the three focus groups to manage their various responsibilities. The participants shared the opinion that obtaining WLB and managing inter-role conflict begins with the person and that proactive coping mechanisms are necessary when managing numerous roles. For example, soliciting support from family members, close relatives, and friends were individualised coping methods for dealing with the pressure from the work-life domains:

I usually rely on my parents, siblings, or friends to watch the kids when I'm away. Fortunately, my younger sister lives with us and frequently assists with childcare while I'm still at work or school... Without them [family], I don't think it would have been easy. (Focus Group 2, Participant 3)

The British participants in Focus Group 1 also had similar experiences of family support:

Sometimes, my parents can be a helpful resource when I am in a tight situation at work or school. Occasionally, they have helped by picking up my kids and taking them home till I come around. (Focus Group 1, Participant 5)

The conversation in Focus Group 3 and our observations of Focus Groups 1 and 2 suggest that Nigerian single student-working mothers receive greater assistance from family and friends than their British counterparts. We speculate that this may be due to Nigeria's strongly collectivist society and Britain's widespread individualism (Adisa et al., 2016). For instance, we discovered that Nigerian women are more likely than British women to ask other parents for assistance in picking up and returning their kids.

Furthermore, in Focus Group 3, it was interesting to see that more of our Nigerian participants than British participants used 'religion' as a personal coping mechanism. Contrary to the Nigerian participants, who claimed that participating in religious activities and events helped

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3 them manage their multiple responsibilities and achieve WLB, the majority of their British  
4 counterparts saw religion as a source of additional stress and taking up an additional role as a  
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8 ‘member or executive of a religious group’ in which they had little interest, and they preferred  
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10 to engage in work that gives them financial gain. This is consistent with a study published by  
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12 the BBC in 2017 that showed that 53% of 3,000 British respondents claimed they had ‘no  
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14 religion’. The following quotes are typical of the divergent views:

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18 I take religion seriously – it is a significant part of my life... The fact that I get along well  
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20 with other church members allows me to rely on them for childcare occasionally. (Focus  
21  
22 Group 3, Participant 7)

23  
24 Contrarily, a British participant responded:

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27 I identify as a Christian, although I hardly ever go to church or weekly programmes.  
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29 Because you are required to attend every religious function and are occasionally  
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31 given a specific role to fulfil, I think it simply increases the stress. I also work on  
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33 the weekends, including Sundays, because I have bills to pay, and unless the church  
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35 is willing to pay me for those hours, I prefer to work (Focus Group 3, Participant  
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37 4).

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39 In summary, these findings demonstrate that support from family members, close relatives, and  
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41 friends can help single student-working mothers manage their multiple and overlapping roles.

### 42 43 ***Organisational Provisions***

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46 Our findings reveal some organisational provisions that may help single student-working  
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48 mothers with their multiple roles in both countries, although to varying degrees. Evidently, our  
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50 British participants received greater organisational support than their Nigerian counterparts.  
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52 For instance, British participants gave accounts of greater access to flexible work  
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54 arrangements:

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58 My employer gave me some flexibility because they are aware of my situation. For  
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60 instance, because I go to university twice weekly, my line manager gave me those

days off and increased my hours on the other three days. On weekdays, I have a childminder, and I resume my childcare responsibilities on weekends. (Focus Group 1, Participant 6).

Similar reports were made by the British participants in Focus Group 3. They highlighted a range of flexible work arrangements, such as job sharing, part-time work, compressed working hours, and shift work. However, due to the rigidity of the work environment in Nigeria, Nigerian participants voiced their dissatisfaction with having little or no access to flexible working options:

I am astounded by the degree of flexibility provided to you guys [the British participants]. I'm sure the other Nigerian women present will agree that our alternatives are quite limited. In my situation, I have to balance working full-time in Lagos with doing part-time graduate courses. This is because I need a higher degree for career growth and higher pay to provide a better life for my family and myself (Focus Group 3, Participant 9)

The above quotes reveal the differences in the degree of flexible working arrangements in both countries. Generally, considering the participants' profiles, we find that most of the Nigerian participants have full-time jobs and study part-time, whereas most British participants work part-time and study full-time. Essentially, following the conversation, we may infer that enrolling in full-time studies was more practical for the British participants, who reported going to university twice weekly, than for Nigerians, who claimed that they go to university nearly every day. Nonetheless, even if part-time education (even temporarily) adds to their workload, Nigerian and British participants use it as a coping strategy to advance their careers and earn more money to improve their quality of life.

In addition to flexible working arrangements, some British participants reported that apprenticeships are another organisational provision (in conjunction with the government) that has allowed them to manage work and education with other responsibilities, while

accommodating opportunities for better learning and career growth. This approach is in contrast to the situation in Nigeria, where apprenticeship programmes are not available. For example, one participant said:

Some British organisations, like mine, provide apprenticeship options; however, they could be too limited for single women. So, while I'm working and gaining experience, I'm studying at the same time and performing my childcare duties.  
(Focus Group 1, Participants 10)

Another participant buttressed:

Yes, that's a good point. I have a friend who is on the apprenticeship programme and is also a single mom. But my organisation is yet to offer such opportunities.  
(Focus Group 1, Participant 4)

The above findings suggest that single student-working mothers have the chance to upskill, increase their employment opportunities, and increase their salaries through apprenticeships. This could make it easier for them to meet their expenses concerning childcare, eldercare, and leisure activities.

### ***Government Provisions***

Based on the participants' accounts of their coping mechanisms, we find a significant difference between the British and Nigerian government provisions for single student-working mothers. In Nigeria, economic hardship exacerbates the poor living conditions of single student-working mothers who struggle to make ends meet without government support:

No support is provided for single moms by the Nigerian government. The constitution has provisions for unemployment benefits, but hardly is anything done to implement such. Due to the lack of support from the government, we must deal with numerous challenges on our own. (Focus Group 2, Participant 5)

There is no government support in any way. I find it difficult to cope with the finances of childcare and the tuition for my school and that of my kids. So I must



use any alternative methods to cope with these challenges. For example, occasionally, when I don't have someone to help, I have had to leave my children at home for many hours by themselves while I go to work or school. I am conscious that doing that in the UK is risky and may get me in trouble, but I don't have much of a choice. (Focus Group 3, Participant 8)

In contrast, most British participants alluded to various government support available to them:

The [British] government provides the necessary support to low-income individuals like myself. For example, I'm entitled to 30 hours of childcare support weekly, and sometimes I get up to £2,000 yearly for child support. Also, there are benefits like universal credit, tax income support, and housing benefits. All these help in some way. (Focus Group 3, Participant 4)

Another participant buttressed:

In addition to what she [Focus Group 3, Participant 4] said, I'm entitled to student loans to support my studies. There is also support for the elderly because the government provides care homes for some based on their circumstances. For instance, my mother's care home is partially paid for by the local council because her savings are less than the required amount (Focus Group 3, Participant 3)

In summary, the findings show that British single student-working mothers benefit from a variety of government support types, including childcare, adult care, student loans, after-school and breakfast clubs, apprenticeships, universal credit, and housing benefits. In contrast, Nigerian single student-working mothers do not have access to government support, which is essential for coping with their finances and would serve as income support to cover childcare, adult care, tuition and other necessary expenses for ensuring good living standards.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This study set out to investigate the WLB experiences of single student-working mothers. Drawing on a comparative study of Nigerian and British single student-working mothers, our findings uncover the varying experiences and coping mechanisms utilised in these two different

environments. As a result, we contribute to the existing literature on WLB in several ways. First, by undertaking a qualitative study, we add to the scant empirical literature on the WLB of single student-working mothers and advance our understanding of the experiences and challenges related to obtaining WLB in this under-researched context. A key finding is that single student-working mothers find it difficult to achieve WLB because they have to manage several responsibilities by themselves. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies in that having to juggle multiple and overlapping demands, such as schoolwork, paid work, and childcare obligations, make WLB unrealistic for them (Gatrell et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2020). Second, by comparing research from developing (Nigeria) and developed (Britain) countries, we demonstrate the variability of the WLB experiences and coping mechanisms driven by different political, economic, and socio-cultural factors. In particular, we find that regardless of their nationalities, single student-working mothers are affected by inter-role conflict, role ambiguity, role strain, role overload and external role pressures, which make achieving WLB a herculean task. Nevertheless, given the different political, economic and socio-cultural landscapes of the two countries, the extent to which the aforementioned factors impact on single student-working mothers varies and influences the range of coping mechanisms adopted in the two contexts. For example, participants' accounts in Nigeria revealed that poor economic conditions have exacerbated the poor living conditions of single student-working mothers who struggle to make ends meet without government support. In contrast, although they experienced similar WLB challenges, we find that the British participants are more likely to seek government support, which has helped them cushion some costs related to childcare, eldercare, and education. In addition, Nigerian single student-working mothers are more likely than their British counterparts to experience significant external role pressures. This finding is related to the unique socio-cultural expectations placed on women in Nigeria to remarry due to the extreme stigmatisation associated with being a single mother.

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***Theoretical implications***

We contribute to the current understanding of role theory in terms of how single student-working mothers manage their multiple and overlapping roles – i.e. being students, single mothers, caregivers, and workers. Role theory starts with a set of normative expectations that are assumed to determine specific roles or statuses in social structure and their accompanying responsibilities or actions in interaction with others (Vandenberghe et al., 2017). Roles emerge from an individual’s conformity to particular societal standards. Nevertheless, our findings are consistent with Turner’s (1962) contention that conformity only provides a partial picture of role behaviour and that role theory places too much emphasis on imitation and too little emphasis on innovation, both of which are essential components of adopting roles. It is important to acknowledge that ‘role-takers’ are also ‘role-makers’, since people are sometimes forced to improvise rather than merely adopt roles as models for conformist behaviour (Scott, 2015). For instance, in the case of single student-working mothers, we may infer that in addition to taking on the role of mothers, in their role as single parents, they may also feel the need to imitate the role of a father to bridge the gap. When doing so, they may frequently need to improvise so that they can deal with the expectations or demands of fatherhood, which may also be true for other roles, including being students and workers. Furthermore, a closer look at role expectations, particularly in Nigeria, reveals that patriarchal inclinations have an impact on socio-cultural expectations, leading to a very high level of socially enforced roles. For instance, given that patriarchy fosters men’s social dominance over women (Adisa et al., 2016), the accounts of our Nigerian participants demonstrate a significant number of structural roles, as evidenced by the external pressure to remarry rather than assume the dual father-mother role, wherein each parental role is distinct and based on the expectations associated with each role — that is, fathers as breadwinners and mothers as caregivers.

### ***Practical implications***

From a practical stance, our findings may help single student-working mothers to learn from their counterparts' experiences and coping mechanisms, which may help them to achieve WLB. For instance, garnering more social support from family, friends, and relatives may help ease the pressure of managing multiple roles. However, we are mindful that increasing dependence on these individuals could have a detrimental effect on their WLB. Furthermore, similar to the findings of Cain et al. (2018), we suggest that role identification is crucial for achieving WLB. This requires single student-working mothers to adjust to new roles and demands. As Adamson et al. (2022) contend, single student-working mothers must not only consider how to achieve WLB as a priority but also why they are in pursuit of a desired type of WLB. Organisations must also have fair and flexible work arrangements that consider the needs of single student-working mothers. Lastly, governments must do more to support single student-working mothers by offering considerable benefits to help reduce the costs of combining and managing their multiple commitments. The Nigerian government, in particular, must become more proactive in providing childcare benefits, free or subsidised adult care, and education support.

We conclude from our participants' accounts that having several roles might hinder their capacity to manage the roles effectively. Taking on several roles can result in role ambiguity (a lack of knowledge regarding role expectations), role conflict (a discrepancy between two or more roles), and role overload (an incompatibility between the volume of the roles and the available time to fulfil them). Therefore, as these women 'wear many hats' and assume the position of a 'superwoman' from managing multiple roles, they are subjected to role overload and role conflict, leading to significant stress levels.

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Common to all studies, the contributions of the current study have certain research limitations that should be considered, which may create opportunities for future research. The main limitation of this present study is its methodological choices. For instance, using the qualitative approach lacks generalisation compared to the quantitative approach, given that the outcomes may be restricted to a specific demographic or research setting and not all because of the differences in perceptions (Saunders et al., 2019). A qualitative research approach was purposefully chosen to explore the under-researched context as opposed to the collection of numerical responses that do not give an in-depth understanding of the reasons behind the participants' responses. Moreover, while this study presents a comparative study of a developed and developing country, the results may not be generalisable to other developed or developing countries. This is because, for instance, we have not taken into account the job types and positions of the participants, which may further provide some nuanced details of their experiences. Additionally, although we considered the number of dependent children and adults for whom the participants provide care, our study did not go into fine detail about how the variations in the number of dependent children and adults may affect WLB outcomes. Future studies may therefore consider another under-researched context – single working fathers or single student-working fathers – to understand how their experiences may differ from those of single student-working mothers.

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**Appendix 1**

**Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profile**

Name	Age	No of Dependent Children	No of Dependent Adults	Academic Level/Type	Employment Type	Nationality
Focus Group 1						
Participant 1	29	2	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 2	42	2	1	UG/PT	FT	British
Participant 3	25	1	1	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 4	35	2	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 5	35	4	0	UG/PT	FT	British
Participant 6	27	1	0	UG/FT	FT	British
Participant 7	31	3	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 8	47	3	1	PG/PT	PT	British
Participant 9	34	2	0	PG/PT	PT	British
Participant 10	22	1	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Focus Group 2						
Participant 1	30	2	1	UG/FT	PT	Nigerian
Participant 2	41	2	2	PG/FT	PT	Nigerian
Participant 3	38	2	0	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 4	30	1	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 5	43	3	2	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 6	39	2	0	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 7	21	1	0	UG/FT	PT	Nigerian
Participant 8	26	2	1	UG/PT	PT	Nigerian
Participant 9	38	1	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 10	47	3	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Focus Group 3						
Participant 1	31	2	0	UG/FT	FT	British
Participant 2	26	1	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 3	44	3	1	PG/FT	PT	British
Participant 4	37	2	0	PG/PT	FT	British
Participant 5	24	1	0	UG/FT	PT	British
Participant 6	41	2	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 7	34	2	1	PG/FT	PT	Nigerian
Participant 8	40	3	2	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 9	44	3	0	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Participant 10	35	2	1	PG/PT	FT	Nigerian
Note: Full-Time (FT); Part-Time (PT); Undergraduate (UG); Postgraduate (PG)						

**Appendix 2****Table 2: Emerging Themes with Indicative Quotations**

Research inquiry	Indicative quotations	First-order codes	Codes consolidation and conceptual categories	Main themes
Work-life balance experiences of single student-working mothers	<p>It is always difficult for me to handle all these commitments because one of them is always likely to suffer at the expense of others... (Focus Group 2, Participant 4)</p> <p>The cost of living in the UK is high, now imagine being the only one paying those bills and then going to school, and taking care of the kids. To be honest, that's a lot for one person to handle. (Focus Group 1, Participant 9)</p>	Multiple work-life roles, conflict between roles, deteriorating health and well-being, role pressure from family and friends, new confusing roles, role identification, role adjustment	<p>Inter-role conflict</p> <p>Role ambiguity</p> <p>Role strain</p> <p>Role overload</p> <p>External role pressures</p>	<b>Multiple role challenges</b>
Coping mechanisms adopted by single student-working mothers	<p>My family is supportive and always there for me whenever I need them to help look after my children, even though my dad indirectly keeps saying that I should get married and let a man do a man's duties (Focus Group 2, Participant 1).</p> <p>In my opinion, the support I get from my family to look after my kids is very limited because you must also consider that they also have their respective jobs to keep... (Focus Group 1, Participant 7)</p>	Support from family members, close relatives, and friends, spirituality and religious events	Individual initiatives	<b>Role-combining coping mechanisms</b>
	<p>Flexibility in my workplace is very limited... You either work part-time, earn low pay, and be scared that you might lose your job, or you work full-time and keep your job. (Focus Group 2, Participant 10)</p> <p>Depending on the number of commitments I have, I can pick between working part-time and full-time. There is nothing particularly troubling about my job because it is considerably flexible. (Focus Group 1, Participant 3)</p>	Flexible work arrangements (e.g. part-time work, compressed work hours, job sharing and shift work), apprenticeships	Organisational provisions	
	<p>Government support is available because different schemes and benefits can help foot some of the bills, even though sometimes it can be challenging... (Focus Group 3, Participant 1)</p> <p>Support from the government? There is nothing like that. Everyone is aware that the Nigerian government does not prioritise issues like these. (Focus Group 2, Participant 2)</p>	Childcare support, adult care homes, student loans, after-school and breakfast clubs, apprenticeship, universal credit, and housing benefits	Government provisions	