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Being Single in Parenting: Constructing and Reflecting the Experiences of International PhD Student Mothers in Pursuing a Study by Utilizing the Collaborative Autoethnography Method

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined the coping strategies employed by international PhD student mothers (IPSMs) to navigate the complex challenges encountered throughout their PhD journeys. This study utilized the collaborative autoethnography (CAE) method to investigate the experiences of five IPSMs who were engaged in collective reflection. The IPSMs revealed that their journeys were not solely academic endeavors but rather meaningful experiences that fostered resilience and adaptation, enabling them to contribute significantly to ecological system theory (EST). They identified key strategies for balancing their dual roles by constructing and reflecting on their experiences, such as affirming a positive mindset to enhance self-efficacy, connecting with communities and involving children in academic activities. The findings underscore the importance of campus support systems that highlight the role of mentorship, flexible policies*

and inclusive environments in mitigating the challenges faced. This study provides valuable insights for universities that aim to support the student–parent nexus and contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between academic and familial roles in international PhD studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Mothers' participation in advanced study has become increasingly visible across higher education, including PhD programs, even as caregiving and household labor continue to shape women's academic trajectories (Mao, 2022). This study defines an international PhD student mother (IPSM) as a woman enrolled in a PhD program outside her country of citizenship or long-term residence who simultaneously holds the primary responsibility for one or more children. Although IPSMs have garnered increasing amounts of scholarly attention over the past decade (Kent et al., 2020), studies have notably expanded during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have documented the heightened pressures, constraints and negotiations involved in balancing PhD studies with caregiving (Evans et al. (2024), Hassan and Machado (2025), and Mason et al. (2024)). Nevertheless, gender-based expectations frequently impose additional burdens on women (Ataide Pinheiro, 2021; Cronshaw et al., 2024), especially where IPSMs are expected to prioritize familial responsibilities over academic or professional aspirations, especially in comparison to their male partners (LeBlanc et al., 2022).

The Indonesian government, in its strategic initiative to increase the quality of human resources and improve the skills of the workforce (Putra et al., 2024), introduced the Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) to provide scholarships for its citizens to pursue postgraduate studies in Indonesia and abroad, including in Malaysia. Since its inception in 2012, more than 24,000 Indonesians have entered into agreements as scholarship recipients (Rachman, 2023). In 2025, 33 individuals were awarded scholarships for PhD programs in Malaysia, 22 of whom were women. However, balancing the rigorous demands of PhD studies with the responsibilities of motherhood, particularly in a foreign cultural and academic setting, can be emotionally and physically challenging for students and their children (Phan et al., 2024). Research on Indonesian PhD student mothers studying abroad remains limited, despite these challenges

(Utami, 2019), especially in Malaysia. Hence, this study sought to address the following research question: How do IPSMs employ coping strategies to navigate the range of challenges encountered throughout their PhD journeys in Malaysia?

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and Its Influence on IPSMs

EST is among the most widely recognized frameworks in human development and is fundamental for understanding the relationships between individuals and their environments (Vizcarrondo Oppenheimer et al., 2017). Bronfenbrenner (1976) made a significant contribution to this area with his conceptualization of the theory, which emphasizes the dynamic interaction between an individual and the immediate environment (Perera, 2023). EST posits that an individual's development is shaped by a series of interconnected environmental systems, ranging from the immediate context (family) to broader societal structures (culture) (Guy-Evans, 2024). EST has significant implications for students' motivation to learn by suggesting that these environmental systems must be optimized to stimulate development (Perera, 2023).

EST offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay between individuals and their environments, mainly in terms of constructing and reflecting on IPSMs' experiences. According to Bronfenbrenner (1976), the model emphasizes that development occurs through a dynamic and bidirectional relationship between IPSMs and various environmental contexts. Each level in the ecological model, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, represents a different facet of this relationship, with each influencing and being influenced by IPSMs in distinct ways (Vlcek, 2023). The microsystem is the most immediate environment and is crucial in shaping an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). It includes settings where IPSMs actively participate, such as the family and school. The term "mesosystem" refers to the interrelations between different microsystems in an individual's life. It highlights how IPSMs' experiences in one setting, such as a school, could influence or be influenced by experiences in other settings, such as the home or community (Guy-Evans, 2024). The exosystem refers to settings that do not directly involve the individual but still affect their development through indirect interactions, which include broader social structures, such as local governments, mass media, or the world of work.

The macrosystem represents the overarching cultural or societal context in which all other systems exist. It includes the dominant ideologies, values and beliefs of a given culture or subculture that shape the structure of institutions and interactions in those contexts. The chronosystem refers to the temporal aspect of development and accounts for changes over time and how these shifts impact IPSMs' life course. These changes may be predictable, such as the transition to school, or unpredictable, such as parental separation or changes in socioeconomic status (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). A dialogical perspective suggests that

IPSMs and the social are inextricably intertwined, with the development of one's self occurring through interaction with others and in social contexts (Sun, 2022).

Coping with Dual Roles: Motherhood and PhD Studies

IPSMs continue to be a historically marginalized demographic in higher education, despite their significant roles in family life through caregiving and household responsibilities (Phan et al., 2024). The challenge of balancing PhD studies with substantial family obligations can negatively impact well-being (Utami, 2019), particularly when role conflict is exacerbated by insufficient institutional and social support (Cronshaw et al., 2024). Wu et al. (2025) examined the reflective processes underlying such decisions and revealed a complex interplay of motivations shaped by IPSM identity factors, such as personal aspirations and ontological beliefs, as well as broader sociocultural influences. In contrast, McCallum (2016) posited that the decision to pursue a PhD is seldom an "isolated" one; rather, it is frequently influenced by cumulative educational aspirations and encouragement from parents, extended family and fictive kin. These intersecting responsibilities, in the demanding environment of PhD education, could intensify stress and create ongoing tensions related to time, energy, and identity (LeBlanc et al., 2022; Mao, 2022), occasionally leading to considerations of attrition (Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025). Concurrently, PhD enrollment is often driven by forward-looking motivations, such as enhancing financial stability, securing a better future for children, and completing previously interrupted educational trajectories (Fatima et al., 2025).

A substantial body of research has examined the lived experiences of IPSMs in various contexts (Hassan & Machado, 2025) and has primarily highlighted their strategies for balancing academic responsibilities with family life. IPSMs, from a feminist transnational perspective, are conceptualized as structural cross-border issues rather than merely individual time-management challenges (Phan, 2022). Studies have elucidated how IPSMs are situated at the confluence of gendered caregiving norms, mobility/immobility and institutional productivity expectations that presuppose an unencumbered scholar (Mao, 2022). Empirical and narrative analyses have examined IPSMs' trajectories in diverse settings, including New Zealand (Phan et al., 2024), South Africa (Bireda, 2015), the United Kingdom (Cronshaw et al., 2024; Moran et al., 2021), the United States (Evans et al., 2024; Hong, 2021; Kent et al., 2020; Sirgebayeva, 2025; VanZoest et al., 2025), Australia (Fridani et al., 2020; Schriever, 2021), Pakistan (Fatima et al., 2025), the Philippines (Bustillo et al., 2024), and Central Asia (Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025). However, research specifically addressing IPSMs in Malaysia remains scarce. Notably, researchers have documented heightened constraints and emerging stressors, such as mobility disruptions and prolonged family separations (Fridani et al., 2020; Phan, 2022); challenges in making employment and caregiving decisions alongside academic commitments (LeBlanc et al., 2022); and psychosocial and physical strains, including anxiety (An et al., 2025), fatigue (Bustillo et al., 2024), emotional and physical overwhelm (Evans et al., 2024; Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025), and diminished concentration (Fridani et al., 2020).

Mentorship also emerges as a protective factor, with mentors assisting IPSMs in developing realistic timelines that accommodate family obligations and PhD milestones (Kent et al., 2020).

In addition to role strain, IPSMs frequently encounter structural obstacles related to child care, institutional bias and cross-cultural adaptation. Many IPSMs depend significantly on personal networks and individual coping mechanisms, such as support from partners, friends, extended family, counseling, and faith-based resources, especially when institutional support is limited or nonexistent (Hong, 2021; VanZoest et al., 2025). In certain contexts, campus resources fail to provide clear or accessible information regarding child care (Sirgebayeva, 2025), health care or immigration-related issues (Hassan & Machado, 2025). Mason et al. (2024) emphasized that external structural support, including policies, entitlements and institutional provisions, is often absent, inaccessible or poorly communicated, with more than one-third of respondents reporting a lack of institutional support. Cross-cultural challenges may further complicate PhD progression. Mao (2022) discussed difficulties in academic communication and interpreting supervisory expectations in various cultural norms. Other studies highlighted the intersection of gender with racialized exclusion and discrimination, including experiences among Korean IPSMs (Hong, 2021) and black female PhD candidates (Cropps, 2023). This evidence underscores that IPSMs' experiences are shaped by interlocking systems of inequality, including broader sociocultural and sociopolitical conditions that structure opportunities and constraints (McCallum, 2016).

The literature also highlights resources that sustain persistence and facilitate meaning-making. Schriever's (2021) autoethnography employed seven chronological vignettes to elucidate the challenges of IPSMs (time scarcity, embodied exhaustion, disrupted timelines, identity conflict) and their potential advantages (joy, resilience, and renewed purpose). In a similar vein, Mao (2022) identified compassion, connection, commitment and creativity as interrelated practices that support PhD progress. In alignment with these findings, supportive supervisory relationships and a sense of academic belonging are consistently recognized as crucial for sustaining persistence (Asante & Abubakari, 2021; Bireda, 2015). LeBlanc et al. (2022) further underscores the significance of friendships and collegial relationships, mainly among women, as sources of social support that mitigate self-doubt while also critiquing institutional crisis rhetoric that emphasizes what academics should contribute to universities rather than what institutions should provide for caregiver-scholars. From a broader perspective, coping is frequently described as an active process of thinking, feeling, and acting sustained by gratitude, resilience and family/community support during prolonged uncertainty (Fridani et al., 2020). Collectively, these studies suggest that IPSMs' experiences are highly contextual and cannot be generalized. However, they offer essential conceptual and empirical foundations for understanding IPSMs' journeys and for informing more responsive institutional support, mainly in underresearched contexts such as Malaysia.

METHOD

Research Design

Autoethnography is a compelling and valuable qualitative method that provides a means for amplifying personal experiences to enrich sociological understanding (Wall, 2008). Autoethnography, as a critical self-reflection method, enables individuals to explore and articulate their lived experiences in broader cultural and social contexts (Ellis et al., 2011; Scales et al., 2024). It functions as a process and a product of an individual's experiences (Asante & Abubakari, 2021). Individuals connect past experiences with current realities and future aspirations through narratives to make sense of their journeys (Sun, 2022; Wall, 2008). Adams (2008) argued that autoethnographic writing combines personal storytelling with critical analysis that allows for the examination and challenge of cultural norms and practices. This study adopted a collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) approach to explore and reflect on IPSMs' experiences in the pursuit of a PhD while raising children. CAE shares many elements with solo autoethnography, with the main element being the extension of a method to build collaboration among participants (Roy et al., 2021). Phan et al. (2024) contended that the CAE process facilitates the creation of a supportive community among participants and enriches the inquiry by adding diversity and depth to the subject matter. In this study, the CAE was intended as a reflection on the PhD journey of the five authors. The authors aimed to share their personal narratives with the intent of inspiring and motivating IPSMs by articulating and reflecting their experiences in efforts to persist and ultimately succeed in completing their degrees. This approach revealed the deep interconnection between scholarly work and personal narratives (Abdalla, 2024).

Participant and Positionality

All IPSMs in this study were Indonesian lecturers on temporary study leave and were residing in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to pursue their PhD programs.

Table 1: Participants in the Study

No	Pseudonym	Age (Years)	Faculty/School	Year of Study	Number of Children	Age of Children (Years)
1.	Anne	34	Education	4	2	7 and 8
2.	Savia	33	Engineering	3	1	3
3.	Eve	40	Engineering	3	3	13, 11, and 6
4.	Prilly	33	Education	2	1	5
5.	Puspa	31	Medicine	2	1	3

**Noted: Data based on interviews carried out in January 2025

They also carried primary childcare responsibilities without their husbands and without direct assistance from extended family during their study period. IPSMs viewed undertaking a PhD as essential for strengthening their knowledge

base, enhancing their teaching and research capacity, and advancing their academic careers since a PhD is usually expected and often required as a credential for career progression in Indonesian higher education.

Four IPSMs were funded by LPDP, which covered tuition fees, book expenses, visa costs, health insurance, research fees, a living allowance, and a family allowance for up to two accompanying family members; however, one IPSM did not receive scholarship support. The participants' demographic profiles are summarized below.

Procedure and Data Collection

CAE enables an in-depth exploration of learning and the interaction processes through which knowledge is co-constructed (Chudoba & Pelletier, 2023). In terms of reliability, it is assumed that the personal narratives provided by IPSMs reflect an authentic and credible representation of their lived experiences, and that these narratives accurately portray the research question (Asante & Abubakari, 2021). However, it is acknowledged that personal memories are fallible; hence, it is not possible to fully capture or recount experiences in a manner that precisely mirrors the way they live and feel (Ellis et al., 2011). Therefore, semistructured interviews were conducted to articulate and construct the IPSMs' experiences. Two studies conducted interviews from January to March 2025, with the five authors acting as IPSMs, using a set of predetermined questions to ensure consistency across all interviews, as detailed below.

1. Why did you decide to pursue a PhD?
2. How did you perceive the role and responsibilities of being a PhD student?
3. What influenced your decision to bring your children with you while studying abroad?
4. How did you initially adjust to living abroad with your children?
5. How did you manage your time between academic responsibilities and childcare?
6. What has been the most challenging experience you have encountered while pursuing your PhD and caring for your children?
7. Can you provide a reflective statement on how you perceive the experiences of your PhD journey in relation to your personal life?

The studies engaged in comprehensive discussions to analyze the results, following the transcription of the interviews, along with member checking or respondent validation to strengthen the credibility of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Two studies contributed to the evaluation, development and enhancement of the credibility of the results. In addition, they maintained an ongoing process of clarifying the meaning by regularly summarizing and questioning the progression of the analysis. Moreover, the five authors provided their consent for the use of their data and affirmed that the findings were accurately represented in the study's results.

Data Analysis

As articulated by Braun and Clarke (2021), thematic analysis (TA) is a systematic and adaptable approach for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data. This method includes six iterative phases, namely, becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for potential themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. TA's emphasis on reflexivity and the productive use of subjectivity rendered it particularly suitable for this study, given the positions of the five IPSMs as participants, researchers and lecturers managing institutional responsibilities during their study leave abroad.

The five IPSMs, along with two additional non-IPSM coauthors, engaged in a collaborative process of reading and rereading the transcripts to enhance familiarity with the data. Joint coding sessions enabled the research team to collectively identify, refine and negotiate emerging themes that ensured a shared interpretive framework while valuing the unique insight each member contributed. Each author maintained a reflexive journal throughout the coding process to address the dual roles and potential for bias. These research diaries were intended to document evolving interpretations, emotional responses and analytical decisions to instill transparency and reflexive awareness. In addition to individual reflection, the authors conducted regular peer debriefing sessions via face-to-face meetings, Zoom discussions and WhatsApp conversations to critically examine the coding process and challenge assumptions. These debriefings served as a space for dialogic inquiry that allowed the authors to surface and bracket personal biases while reinforcing the trustworthiness of the analysis. The integration of reflexive journaling, peer debriefing and collaborative coding provided a methodological scaffold to balance insider perspectives with analytical rigor, especially in relation to answering the research questions. NVivo 12 software was employed to support the analytical process by managing data organization and reviewing the transcription, coding and theme development. The use of NVivo 12 enhanced the consistency and transparency of the thematic analysis, thus enabling systematic data handling involving multiple collaborators.

RESULTS

These findings indicate that IPSMs' experiences closely align with those of EST, as their PhD journeys are shaped by interactions among the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Moreover, these systems do not operate deterministically. Each IPSM remains an agentive individual who continually makes central decisions, often under uncertainty about study priorities, childcare arrangements, mobility, and risk. In other words, structural conditions and relational environments set constraints and opportunities, but IPSMs actively interpret, negotiate and respond to them in ways that reflect personal values, resources and lived realities. The figure below presents the EST framework used to organize and interpret the findings, followed by a detailed discussion of evidence at each EST level.
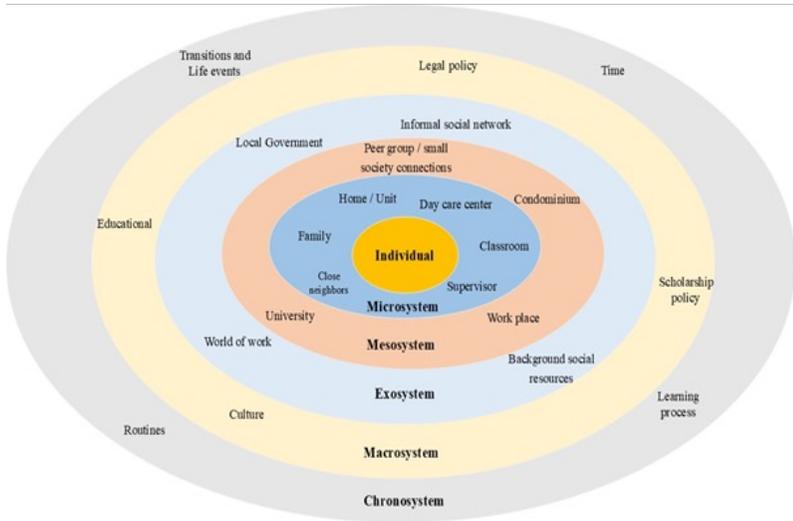
Transitions and Life events — Legal policy — Time

Informal social network

Local Government — Peer group / small society connections

Home / Unit — Day care center — Condominium

Family — Classroom

Individual

Close neighbors — Supervisor

Educational — Scholarship policy

University — Work place

Microsystem

Mesosystem

World of work — Background social resources

Exosystem

Learning process

Culture

Routines — **Macrosystem**

Chronosystem

Figure 1: The EST Framework with the Points of Findings

Microsystem

The daily survival of IPSMs at the microsystem level is influenced by immediate relational care infrastructures that compensate for the absence of partners and extended family. As Eve stated,

"Children are a trust given by God, and I have full responsibility for their growth and development. However, my husband's work requires him to move from one project to another. My parents have passed away, and while my mother-in-law is still alive. She lives in a rural area that is unfamiliar and quite far from us, with a school system and daily environment that are not ideal for our children."

This condition reveals that the microsystem is simultaneously supportive and precarious, often relying on informal goodwill and the IPSM's own capacity to coordinate care. During the early transition period, Prilly demonstrated how arrival and settling-in required constant microlevel adjustments to safeguard children's well-being and stabilize their routines. She stated,

"When we arrived in KL, I followed the plan I had prepared. For the first 14 days, we stayed with relatives, which made the transition easier for both of us. My daughter's greatest challenge was adjusting to the local food. Therefore, I started cooking our own meals to help her feel at home."

Conversely, Anne's narrative illustrates that housing decisions extend beyond mere logistical considerations; rather, it serves as a protective arrangement that transforms the home into a collaborative caregiving system. She recounted,

"Before bringing my children to KL, I moved from a condo near my campus to one closer to the Indonesian Embassy School (Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur/SIKL). I shared a unit with one of the SIKL's teachers, who was

incredibly kind and helpful. We supported each other in many ways. When I had to go to campus and couldn't take my kids, she was there for them."

Similarly, Savia's account underscores how everyday support is often cultivated through proximity and copresence. She remarked,

"I chose my current residence mainly because it is close to my daughter's daycare and my campus. During the early period of my study, I often met Indonesian friends on campus for lunch, which provided space to share stories and talk about challenges. Currently, I also have a housemate from Indonesia, and we support and help each other."

The microsystem includes the adaptation efforts of children, which constitute an additional dimension of maternal labor that operates concurrently with the demands of pursuing a PhD. Puspa illustrated this as follows:

"The greater challenge, however, was for my daughter. Although she had been in nursery since she was three months old, the language barrier (Malay and English) at her new daycare made her feel like an outsider. It took around five months before she felt truly comfortable."

Furthermore, nearly all IPSMs encountered a facilitative environment in the context of PhD academic life characterized by flexible supervision and supervisors who adopted family-oriented perspectives, thereby encouraging and supporting IPSMs in their dual roles as mothers and PhD students. Eve shared her view by saying,

"My supervisors have been truly supportive and easy to approach, and they're open to talking about personal or family challenges when I need to. They still take my academic responsibilities seriously, but they genuinely understand the double role IPSMs carry."

Mesosystem

IPSMs' experiences at the mesosystem level are influenced by the interconnections between various settings, such as the interactions between campus arrangements, childcare realities and community networks. Puspa said,

"At Campus, the biggest support isn't an official childcare policy, but it's the flexibility in my department. For example, more adaptable hours and workspaces help balance study and caregiving. Therefore, it is generally fine to occasionally bring children to campuses, and the main library even has a family-friendly space. However, in my opinion, Campus still doesn't have formal childcare facilities like a daycare or playground."

Savia corroborated this perspective, as she noted,

"To my knowledge, the campus operates a preschool, but it is open to the public and not specifically intended for students who are studying while caring for young children. Information about this preschool is not widely shared among students, and its location outside the main campus area makes it less accessible."

Therefore, the issue is not solely the absence of facilities but also the inadequacy of institutional bridges (communication, location, eligibility, design) that could render support accessible for IPSMs.

A mesosystem pattern is evident in the reliance on informal policy-in-practice that connects academic environments with parenting realities, mainly in classroom settings. Prilly noted that,

> *"In my faculty, it was basically understood that students could bring their kids to class as long as they didn't disrupt the lesson or other students. I never found an official written policy about it, but from my own experience in more than eight courses, every class I took allowed me to bring my child and have them sit next to me during lectures."*

However, the critical issue, from a mesosystem perspective, is not merely whether the university permits children but also whether there are consistent norms and communication channels that align parenting needs with academic participation without imposing a burden on IPSMs to continually negotiate legitimacy. The mesosystem's linkages extend beyond the campus to community and condominium-based peer networks, which function as practical and emotional support systems that connect children's social lives, mothers' well-being and study time. Eve emphasized the significance of social connections as a means to alleviate stress by stating, *"I've found ways to relieve stress, especially after meeting fellow PhD students or mothers at school events. Conversation and laughter often make my stress melt away, sometimes even a headache disappears."* Furthermore, Anne's narrative regarding her condominium experience illustrates the dual role of the community as a childcare support system and a source of peer belonging. She remarked, *"Another blessing was that many Indonesians lived in my condo, so my children easily made friends. If I needed to run errands or go to campus, I could leave them with my neighbors, knowing they were in good hands."*

Exosystem

IPSMs, at the exosystem level, are influenced by contexts beyond their direct control, yet these contexts significantly shape their opportunity. Such influences include broader community networks, professional expectations and the underlying social resources that facilitate the feasibility of PhD pursuits. Anne's decision-making exemplifies how the exosystem's influence manifests through vicarious role models and transnational imaginaries. She derived confidence from a participant in her study, a Kenyan woman working as an international school teacher in Jakarta. Anne utilized this narrative as a comparative framework to justify her own decision to migrate with her children, as she articulated,

> *"If she can live and work abroad with her children in such different environments, why can't I bring mine to KL? The culture there is quite similar to that of Indonesia, and there is also a large Indonesian community in KL, which would make the adjustment easier."*

This scenario extends beyond mere motivation and illustrates how informal social networks and observed narratives serve as evidence that mitigates perceived risks and legitimizes decisions that institutions seldom anticipate. Exosystem pressures are also evident in the professional realm, particularly when PhD research's demands conflict with caregiving responsibilities. Savia recounted,

> *"My most challenging experience was collecting data in oil palm plantations, which required me to stay overnight for several days without being able to bring my daughter. My husband couldn't stay with her because of work in Jakarta. Therefore, I asked a fellow PhD student to help by taking care of her, dropping her off, and picking her up from school while I was away."*

This account underscores that work is not gender neutral in practice. Research activities are structured such that caregivers can disengage from familial responsibilities that compel IPSMs to devise ad hoc solutions. Peers become unpaid and informal childcare providers in this framework, and the progress of PhD studies becomes contingent upon the availability and generosity of others.

Another exosystem pattern is the manner in which IPSMs develop internal coping mechanisms to withstand the pressures of comparison and productivity prevalent in academic culture. Prilly's reflection exemplifies a self-protective approach against competitive benchmarks:

> *"I remind myself that other people's achievements are not the standard for my own, which helps me avoid unnecessary stress. Whenever challenges arise, I choose to see them not as problems but as opportunities to learn and grow— allowing me to truly enjoy the process."*

While this may appear as an individual mindset, it is also a response to exosystem conditions, such as the academic environment's tendency to amplify comparison and speed. IPSMs must actively resist these norms to protect their well-being and sustain their persistence. Conversely, Eve stated,

> *"Indonesian communities in KL are highly supportive and build a strong sense of mutual assistance. Since I stayed in the area where we can find Indonesians easily. It was called the Chow kit, which looked like 'Little Indonesia' in KL. The decision to live near the SIKL was motivated primarily by practical considerations, enabling my primary and secondary school-aged children to commute independently using public transportation."*

Macrosystem

An IPSM's decisions, at the macrosystem level, are influenced by broader societal values and policy environments that are related to what constitutes quality education, familial priorities, and the regulation of mobility. Prilly exemplified this by stating, *"Another key reason why I chose to bring my daughter is education. Here, I have access to better learning opportunities, and I have enrolled her in an international school with a curriculum I believe is a great fit."* Similarly, Savia remarked,

> *"Before I had a plan to study in KL, I wished my daughter would study in Montessori-based school (even better if Islamic Montessori), but I could not find any in Jakarta. Therefore, when I got to have my PhD in Malaysia and there is a full-day Islamic Montessori school, I didn't think twice to have my daughter to study here. Afterward, after my husband and I discussed living and her school expenses vs school expenses in Jakarta, it is more beneficial to get her to study here."*

The macrosystem also operates through funding structures that expand or constrain what is feasible for IPSMs. Anne stated, *"My scholarship agency*

provides a family allowance that is sufficient to cover my child's basic living expenses. This financial support has been very helpful." This observation underscores that family-inclusive funding not only alleviates stress but also actively determines who can relocate with children and under what conditions. In essence, scholarship regimes function as gatekeeping mechanisms that shape the options available to IPSMs well before individual coping strategies are considered. In addition, legal and immigration policies emerge as significant macrosystem forces that generate extensive administrative labor and embodied exhaustion for all IPSMs. Puspa posited,

> *"Securing my daughter's dependent residence visa was time-consuming and physically demanding. I prepared all the documents in advance. Because the tourist visa allowed only 30 days, we made a brief trip to Singapore and later applied for a special pass, juggling classes, my daughter's school, embassy documentation, and repeated immigration visits left me mentally and physically exhausted."*

These experiences demonstrate that an IPSM's mobility is not solely geographical, as it is also bureaucratic and psychological and shaped by regulatory constraints that manifest at the physical and mental levels (fatigue, stress) and can directly compete with the time, attention, and well-being required for PhD studies.

Chronosystem

IPSMs' experiences at the chronosystem level unfold over time as a series of pivotal moments that shift pressures and evolve coping strategies. Anne recounted,

> *"That year in KL with my kids was a real roller coaster! Some days were tough, and other days felt unexpectedly manageable. When my supervisor invited me to a conference in Jordan and then Umrah in October 2024, I was genuinely excited and started getting everything ready. My housemate, and even my kids, cheered me on. However, a week before I was supposed to leave, my son suddenly begged me not to go. He couldn't sleep; he clung to me, and it absolutely broke my heart. In the end, between my children needing me, the cost, and the fact that 11 days felt like too long, I cancelled the trip, refunded the tickets, and decided to stay."*

This narrative illustrates that the trajectories of IPSMs are not linear but are shaped by unforeseen family events and moral decision-making, where progress is continually negotiated against emotional caregiving responsibilities.

The chronosystem is evident in the manner in which IPSMs cultivate ongoing self-management practices that stabilize their PhD pursuits over extended periods. Prilly characterized her journey as an accumulation of strategic habits rather than isolated breakthroughs, as she elucidated, *"In navigating the challenges of my PhD journey, I rely on perseverance, strategic management of my academic workload and motherly responsibilities, and a focus on my mental well-being."* Similarly, Eve's narrative illustrates a more structured, time-blocked approach that aligns with her children's schooling schedules and supervision constraints. She explained,

"For my youngest, I enrolled them in a full-day kindergarten program, so I could pick them up after my campus or library activities. I managed my time for research activities, reporting, and writing between my children's school hours, typically from approximately 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. During this time, one of my children may already be home from school. I usually monitor them through CCTV and direct phone calls."

These routines demonstrate that the IPSM's time is not neutral but rather fragmented, relational and continuously reconfigured in the form of children's needs, school arrangements and safety concerns that evolve throughout the PhD timeline.

The chronosystem is further exemplified in the increasing emphasis placed by IPSMs on emotional regulation and self-care, which are capacities honed through experience. Savia articulated, *"When I have problems or thoughts that need sorting out, I write them down. This helps me see the most feasible solution. If necessary, I also consult with an online psychologist."* Similarly, Puspa conceptualized coping as a learned discipline involving pausing and recalibrating amidst uncertainty, as she expressed,

"For me, overcoming challenges comes down to having a strong emotional quotient (EQ) and being able to regulate my emotions. A PhD journey is full of uncertainties, unexpected results, administrative issues, and personal struggles. I've learned that reacting impulsively rarely helps, so I take a moment to pause, reassess, and approach each situation calmly, focusing on solutions."

This underscores the importance of deliberate recovery time as a consistent practice rather than an occasional luxury. Consequently, these chronosystem narratives demonstrate that the IPSM's resilience is not merely an inherent trait but is cultivated over time through iterative adjustments, crisis moments and the gradual development of routines, boundaries and emotion-focused strategies that facilitate the continuation of a PhD.

DISCUSSION

The findings derived from an in-depth narrative analysis of IPSMs' experiences in managing dual roles demonstrate a significant correlation with the EST framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). This correlation is evident in the specification of how cross-level forces interact to create patterned constraints and support IPSMs, as emphasized by Vlcek (2023). The daily functioning of IPSMs is characterized by continuous coordination efforts, which are shaped by structural arrangements that presuppose an unencumbered PhD study (Phan, 2022). This study indicates that the macrosystem does not merely influence the individual; rather, it is enacted through exosystem processes that reshape the microsystem and, over time, accumulate into the chronosystem as turning points, as mentioned by Perera (2023). At the microsystem level, IPSMs reported successful engagement in supervisory activities without encountering cultural barriers, which actually contradicts the findings of Mao (2022). Racial issues were noted, given the similarities between Malaysia and Indonesia, which contrast with Hong

(2021) and Cropps (2023). Supervisors were found to be very helpful and communicated effectively using a mixed Malay-English language, as IPSMs were Indonesians, although the thesis had to be written in English.

At the mesosystem level, the present study revealed that institutional support was frequently not institutionalized but rather departmentalized and discretionary. It appears that campus facilities for student parents are limited or insufficiently informative, which is consistent with the findings of Sirgebayeva (2025) and VanZoest et al. (2025). Conversely, the exosystem revealed that community networks serve as alternative infrastructures that supply informational, emotional and practical resources that are absent from formal policy. The macrosystem findings have direct policy relevance to scholarship providers and legal policy roles. The processes associated with a dependent's visa are time intensive and compete with academic work and well-being. These findings align with those of Hassan and Machado (2025), who highlighted that immigration issues are sometimes a concern for IPSMs. The findings contribute to broader debates about equity and gendered participation involving IPSMs that go beyond documenting individual coping mechanisms. The data indicate that many of the constraints faced by IPSMs are not incidental but are structurally patterned. PhD milestones, productivity norms and institutional procedures often presume an unencumbered student, while caregiving remains implicitly gendered and disproportionately assigned to women. Consequently, IPSMs' participation is shaped by unequal access to time, energy and institutional legibility. This refines the application of EST by demonstrating that what matters is not merely the presence of settings but also the quality of the bridges between them (Guy-Evans, 2024), such as communication pathways, accessibility, eligibility and cultural acceptability.

This perspective enhances conceptual rigor by positioning IPSMs as active ecological agents who navigate the constraints posed by multiple systems (Mao, 2022). It also demonstrates that resilience is cultivated through iterative adjustment rather than through an innate capacity. IPSMs have identified child-rearing as one of the most significant responsibilities of motherhood, and they fully acknowledge and believe in their ability to manage their dual roles as PhD students and mothers. It is evident that IPSMs have adopted a positive mindset and reduced their worries and negative thoughts through psychological interventions, which contradicts the findings of Utami (2019) and Cronshaw et al. (2024). This approach has also enhanced their self-efficacy and led to the formation of a feminist transnational perspective that significantly impacts how IPSMs navigate their daily lives as single parents. They have become more open-minded and aspire for their children to receive a good education and experience living in KL, in contrast to their country of origin. However, emotional and psychological constraints as well as high levels of pressure remain unavoidable, as noted by LeBlanc et al. (2022), Evans et al. (2024), and Mao (2022). Nonetheless, they are fully aware that their primary motivation for pursuing a PhD is to advance their careers and gain knowledge and experience, thus aligning with Wu et al. (2025). These findings contradict those of McCallum (2016) but are consistent with those of Fatima et al. (2025). Moreover, IPSMs could benefit from peer support, such as a form of mentorship (Kent et al., 2020).

The findings of this study concerning IPSMs' experiences offer unique contributions, as the majority of the literature has focused on IPSMs from Western or Global North countries. However, the sample was homogeneous given that all the participants were Indonesians residing in KL. This homogeneity effectively captured the significant role of Indonesian communities in KL in the adjustment process and the daily lives of IPSMs during their studies, hence supporting Sun (2022), who emphasized the importance of the social context. In this study, IPSMs acknowledged that their PhD journeys were not solely centered on academic achievement but also involved meaningful experiences characterized by resilience, adjustment challenges and strategies employed to complete their PhD. The findings highlight how IPSMs navigated their dual roles through several key strategies, beginning with affirming a positive mindset to enhance their self-efficacy when facing the ups and downs of their journeys. Establishing strong connections with the community, especially with individuals of the same nationality, proved beneficial in facilitating their adjustment in KL. Finally, involving children in academic activities on campus was considered a viable option.

CONCLUSION

The results of the current study reveal that IPSMs' experiences in Malaysia are more accurately characterized as being ecologically shaped rather than individually determined. This study contributes to global discussions on equity and family-inclusive internationalization by illustrating that caregiver involvement is influenced by the effectiveness of institutional bridges, namely, the clarity, accessibility and legitimacy of support that links academic engagement with parenting responsibilities. A practical implication for global higher education is that universities should shift from implicit tolerance to explicit and transparent family support policies. This entails providing clear guidelines on the presence of children in academic settings, establishing minimum standards for inclusive teaching practices, creating accessible family-friendly learning environments rather than marginal or concealed provisions, and offering dependable institutional childcare. Universities should not regard visa processing as a peripheral administrative task and instead establish dedicated visa-navigation support for student parents and incorporate visa timelines into academic planning. The study's conclusions should be considered in light of its limitations, whereby the sample was relatively homogeneous (shared nationality, profession as lecturers, and similar scholarship/host-country conditions), which may underrepresent experiences characterized by greater linguistic distance, racialization, or different visa and funding regimes. Future research should therefore include more diverse IPSM populations in institutions and nationalities in Malaysia and employ longitudinal designs to investigate how ecological support and constraints evolve in different stages of doctoral study and family life.

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❏ *None* √
❏ *Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
❏ *Some sections, with extensive editing*
❏ *Entire work, with minimal or no editing*
❏ *Entire work, with extensive editing*

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