Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal
https://journal.iaimnumetrolampung.ac.id/index.php/igcj

The Lived Experience of Indonesian Doctoral Mothers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Article Information:
Received 2025-11-11
Revised 2026-05-22
Published 2026-05-30

Keywords:
Indonesian doctoral mothers, academic motherhood, interpretative phenomenological analysis, higher education

Abstract
Mothers who pursue doctoral study in Indonesia have grown in number alongside the broader expansion of doctoral education. However, how they interpret and make sense of navigating scholarly and maternal responsibilities within their sociocultural context remains largely unexplored. This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine how ten Indonesian doctoral mothers (aged 31–43) constructed meaning around simultaneously inhabiting the roles of scholar and active mother. In-depth semi-structured interviews were analyzed ideographically prior to the development of carefully grounded cross-case interpretations. Five themes emerged. Participants experienced doctoral entry as institutional necessity rather than personal intellectual aspiration, driven by promotion requirements and credential gatekeeping. They described their doctoral journey as walking a narrow rope, balancing demands as doctoral students, academic professionals, and mothers while navigating hierarchical supervisory relationships. Traditional domestic responsibilities persisted unchanged alongside their studies, anchored by cultural understandings of *kodrat wanita* and reinforced by social surveillance. Profound guilt ran across their daily lives, directed toward their children, spouses, and academic selves. Faith practices, family networks, and peer solidarity functioned as their primary sustaining resources, transforming hardship into meaning through prayer, gratitude, and communal emotional sharing. These findings illuminate how Indonesian doctoral motherhood is shaped by the intersection of institutional demands, gendered cultural norms, and religious meaning-making. The study contributes to more culturally grounded understandings of academic motherhood and calls for institutional responses that recognize the lived complexity of women scholars in collectivist contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral education represents a critical transformation where students evolve into scholars (V. L. Baker et al., 2013; Gardner, 2009; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). For women who are mothers or aspire to become mothers, this transformation is fraught with complexity as they navigate intersections between developing academic identity and roles as mothers, wives, and professionals. The tension arising from this intersection significantly influences women's decisions to discontinue doctoral studies (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004), with research consistently documenting the motherhood penalty: women with children face substantial barriers balancing academic pursuits with family responsibilities, experience higher attrition rates, and bear disproportionate household and childcare responsibilities compared to male academics (M. Baker, 2016; V. Brown & Nichols, 2013; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016; Sallee et al., 2016).

How to cite: Saragih, J. I., Notobroto, H. B., & Andriani, F. (2026). The Lived Experience of Indonesian Doctoral Mothers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal*, *9*(2). https://doi.org/10.25217/0020269792500
E-ISSN: 2614-1566
Published by: Institut Agama Islam Ma'arif NU (IAIMNU) Metro Lampung

Doctoral student mothers (DSMs) experience the challenge of managing "dual lives" navigating competing expectations of "good mother" and "good researcher" (L. Brown & Watson, 2010; Trepal et al., 2014). Edwards (2017) and Hughes & Hughes (2003) describe doctoral education and motherhood as "greedy institutions" competing for women's time and energy. This temporal tension is acute: the average doctoral entry age (26-37 years) coincides with family formation years, and typical four-to-six-year candidature means women simultaneously occupy multiple roles as student, researcher, mother, partner, and employee (Barnett, 2014; M. A. Mason, 2013; Torka, 2020). Consequences include time constraints, financial pressures, health issues, strained relationships, and pervasive guilt about falling short of maternal ideals (Brooks, 2015; Caruth, 2015; CohenMiller & Izekenova, 2022; S. Mason et al., 2023).

Scholars have examined how gender and motherhood are socially constructed to contextualize these experiences. Butler (2011) conceptualizes gender as performative, shaped by culturally variable norms. O'Reilly (2019) distinguishes between "motherhood" as patriarchal institution with prescriptive expectations and "mothering" as lived practice, arguing normative motherhood perpetuates the notion that mothers must prioritize children's needs above their own, including the expectation that "the children must always come before the job." Few women meet these ideals, generating pervasive guilt. The motherhood penalty manifests through assumptions that mothers will be "too busy looking after their kids," affecting hiring, salaries, and promotions regardless of actual parental status (Correll et al., 2007). Critically, motherhood is viewed as "incompatible" with doctoral research in ways fatherhood is not (Broghammer, 2016; Pement, 2013), reflecting gendered assumptions about parenthood in academia (Morgan et al., 2021).

However, DSMs' experiences are not uniformly negative and vary across contexts. Studies centering Black mothers' experiences reveal additional complexity "as they are not only fusing families and careers with doctoral work but also with their racial and maternal identities" (Appling et al., 2018; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Tucker, 2016), underscoring how intersecting identity markers shape experiences fundamentally differently (Crenshaw, 1991). Yet existing literature remains dominated by Western perspectives (S. Mason et al., 2023). Recent studies from Central and East Asia reveal how national ideologies and patriarchal structures shape DSM experiences differently, with post-independence nation-building in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan reinforcing gender norms positioning women primarily as mothers, wives, and caretakers (Durrani et al., 2022; Kudaibergenova, 2016).

A critical gap persists regarding Indonesian doctoral student mothers. Despite Indonesia's rapidly expanding higher education system and increasing numbers of women pursuing doctoral degrees, empirical evidence focusing specifically on this population remains limited. Indonesian doctoral education operates within a demanding institutional framework requiring approximately 3.5–7 years of rigorous study, demonstration of research novelty, and increasingly, international publication as part of graduation requirements. Within this system, students report substantial structural and relational challenges. Approximately 90% report inadequate time to manage academic workload, 90% experience supervisory conflicts, and 85% struggle to balance family responsibilities (Wahidah et al., 2023). Doctoral progression is often highly dependent on supervisory dynamics within relatively hierarchical academic cultures, where delays, unclear feedback, and publication pressures intensify psychological strain.

For women, these institutional demands intersect with powerful sociocultural expectations. Indonesian doctoral mothers face what may be described as a "triple burden": academic responsibilities, domestic and marital obligations, and religious duties. The Kodrat Wanita ideology (Suryakusuma, 2011) positions women primarily as devoted wives and nurturing mothers, often subordinating professional identities to domestic roles. Within extended kinship systems that prioritize family harmony and social reputation, women are

expected to fulfil domestic responsibilities while maintaining relational balance. Religion further plays a dual role: it may function as a normative mandate reinforcing domestic devotion, yet it also serves as a source of resilience and meaning-making that sustains persistence in the face of institutional barriers (Nurmila, 2013; Riany et al., 2017). Thus, Indonesian doctoral mothers navigate a uniquely layered terrain shaped simultaneously by structural academic pressures, gendered cultural ideologies, kinship expectations, and religious commitments. No theoretical model currently explains how Indonesian women navigate these intersecting domains or how sociocultural and institutional factors influence their well-being and persistence (V. L. Baker et al., 2013; Moradi, 2005).

The rationale of this study addresses both theoretical and practical gaps. Theoretically, Indonesia offers compelling context for extending frameworks of academic identity development and maternal theory into a collectivist setting where motherhood is socially revered yet institutionally constrained. Examining Indonesian DSMs' experiences can reveal culturally specific dimensions potentially explaining the more positive effects suggested for Asian contexts. Practically, as Indonesia invests substantially in doctoral education as part of national development, understanding how institutional structures and cultural contexts affect women's participation becomes an equity imperative. Indonesia's growing population of women pursuing doctoral degrees necessitates examination of whether current academic structures adequately support mothers balancing scholarly and familial responsibilities.

Based on this rationale, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of Indonesian doctoral student mothers through phenomenological inquiry, examining how they construct and reconcile academic and maternal identities within the sociocultural fabric of Indonesian higher education. By situating these experiences within global and local frameworks, this study seeks to contribute to more inclusive understanding of Indonesian doctoral motherhood. The findings are expected to enrich theoretical discourse on academic identity development and maternal theory while offering practical recommendations for universities and policymakers to create more equitable and supportive environments for women scholars.

METHODS

Design

IPA was considered appropriate for three main reasons. First, its idiographic commitment enables in-depth exploration of individual experiential accounts before moving to cross-case analysis, allowing close attention to the contextual and relational complexity of Indonesian mothers undertaking doctoral study (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Second, IPA is grounded in a double hermeneutic process in which participants make sense of their lived experiences, and the researcher interprets that sense-making (Larkin et al., 2006; J. A. Smith, 2004). Third, IPA recognizes the active and reflexive role of the researcher in the analytic process (Larkin et al., 2006). Accordingly, the analysis involved iterative reading, memoing, and sustained interpretative engagement with the data rather than a purely descriptive summary (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit participants who shared a clearly bounded experiential context: Indonesian women simultaneously undertaking doctoral study and active motherhood. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be Indonesian citizens residing in Indonesia; (2) be actively enrolled in a doctoral program; and (3) be mothers of at least one child under 18 during their doctoral study. These criteria ensured that participants reflected on ongoing, lived experience rather than retrospective accounts. Participants (N = 10) were recruited between March and April 2025. Initial participants (n = 4) were identified through the first author’s professional networks and contacted via email or WhatsApp. All

received an information sheet outlining the study aims, confidentiality, and voluntary participation before providing written informed consent. Snowball recruitment was subsequently used to access additional eligible participants (n = 6) within similar professional contexts, while remaining within the predefined inclusion criteria.

While experiential homogeneity was prioritised, variation was retained within these boundaries, including age, disciplinary background, mode of study, and stage of doctoral candidature. This approach aligns with IPA's commitment to exploring shared phenomenological terrain while honouring individual particularity (Larkin et al., 2006). Participants' ages ranged from 31 to 43 years (M = 37.2), with children aged between 1 and 11 years. Doctoral stages ranged from first-year to final-year candidature. All participants were employed as university lecturers across diverse institutions (public and private) and academic disciplines. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

No	Initials	Age	Marital Status	Year in Program	Mode of Study	Number and Age of Children
1	MT	35	Divorced	2	Full-time study	2 (ages 3 and 6)
2	MR	38	Married	4	Part-time (working student)	2 (ages 4, and 7)
3	ST	39	Married	5	Full-time study	3 (ages 3, 7, and 10)
4	IY	40	Married	4	Full-time study	1 (age 2)
5	HY	31	Divorced	3	Full-time study	2 (ages 2 and 5)
6	KR	36	Married	4	Part-time (working student)	2 (ages 7 and 10)
7	MS	36	Married	4	Full-time study	2 (ages 6 and 8)
8	TD	32	Married	5	Part-time (working student)	1 (age 1)
9	LL	43	Married	4	Part-time (working student)	3 (ages 4, 8, and 11)
10	ML	42	Married	2	Full-time study	3 (ages 3, 6, and 10)

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten doctoral student mothers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a flexible interview guide informed by the study's research question. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The guide included broad, open-ended prompts exploring participants' motivations for doctoral study, their lived experience of navigating academic work and motherhood, experiences of challenge and support, and the meanings they attributed to these experiences. While the interview guide covered multiple domains to establish rapport and context, the interviews employed intensive probing techniques characteristic of IPA methodology. Following Smith (2004), interviews focused on eliciting rich, detailed, first-person accounts of specific lived experiences rather than general descriptions. For example, when participants mentioned tensions between academic and maternal roles, probing questions included: "Can you walk me through a specific moment when you felt this tension? What was happening? What were you thinking and feeling?" This approach enabled deep phenomenological exploration of how doctoral mothers experientially navigate and make meaning of their dual identities. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis following IPA procedures.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009),

which emphasizes idiographic engagement with each participant's lived experience and the interpretative relationship between participant and researcher. The analysis proceeded through iterative, hermeneutic cycles rather than linear steps. Each transcript was first analyzed individually to honor the idiographic commitment central to IPA. We engaged deeply with each participant's account through multiple readings while listening to audio recordings, allowing immersion in their experiential world. During this phase, we made extensive exploratory notes capturing descriptive observations (what was said), linguistic features (how it was said), and conceptual insights (what it might mean). These notes formed the foundation for interpretative dialogue with the text.

From these detailed annotations, emergent themes were developed for each case, staying close to participants' own meaning-making while offering psychological interpretation. We then examined connections and patterns within each individual case, using techniques of abstraction, subsumption, and contextualization to organize themes. Only after completing idiographic analysis of all ten cases did, we begin cross-case interpretation, searching for both convergent experiences and points of divergence across participants' accounts. The final interpretative framework comprised five superordinate themes, each grounded in participants' narratives yet reflecting our interpretative engagement with what these experiences might signify. NVivo software was used as an organizational tool to manage data systematically, but the interpretative work remained grounded in close, hermeneutic reading of individual accounts. Throughout the analysis, we maintained reflexive awareness of our own interpretative influence, documented in an analytical journal.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Trustworthiness was established in ways consistent with the epistemological foundations of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). First, an idiographic analytic process was maintained, with each case analysed in detail before moving to cross-case pattern development (Tindall, 2009). This ensured that shared themes were grounded in close engagement with individual accounts rather than premature abstraction. Verbatim extracts are presented in the findings to enable readers to evaluate the interpretative claims.

Second, reflexivity was integral throughout the research process. The first author is an Indonesian woman who has personally navigated the simultaneous demands of doctoral study and active motherhood, bringing direct experiential familiarity with the phenomenon under study. This insider positioning informed interpretive sensitivity throughout data collection and analysis, while also necessitating ongoing critical self-examination to guard against assumptive readings. The second author, with experience coordinating a doctoral program in public health, contributed a broader institutional perspective on the structural conditions shaping doctoral candidates' experiences. The third author, a senior academic in psychology and education who has served as doctoral program coordinator, provided supervisory oversight and contributed to the conceptual grounding of the study. Given the interpretative nature of IPA and its acknowledgment of double hermeneutics, the first author engaged in ongoing reflexive memoing to critically examine assumptions, positionality, and potential biases, particularly in relation to doctoral study and motherhood. Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, reflexivity was used to enhance transparency in the interpretative process.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology (Approval No. 1504/B/UN3.FPSI/III/TA.00.03/2025). All participants received a detailed information sheet outlining the study’s aims, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality safeguards. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were assured that they could withdraw at any time without

consequence. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting to protect participants' identities, and all data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

RESULTS

This analysis presents how ten Indonesian doctoral mothers made sense of their experiences navigating doctoral study and motherhood simultaneously. Consistent with interpretative phenomenological analysis principles, the presentation begins with individual accounts before identifying shared patterns, attending to both convergence and divergence in meaning-making, and maintaining interpretative openness throughout. Verbatim quotations are used to illustrate participants' voices and preserve the authenticity of their lived experiences. To maintain confidentiality, each quotation is identified using a participant code (e.g., P1–P10), indicating the source of the excerpt without disclosing personal information.

The analysis generated five themes, each containing three sub-themes that capture the layered and multidimensional nature of participants' experiences: (1) *"I Had No Choice": Experiences of Institutional Necessity*; (2) *"Walking on a Narrow Rope": Experiences of Precarious Balancing*; (3) *"Still Expected to Cook": Navigating Continued Family Responsibilities*; (4) *"It Breaks My Heart": Experiences of Guilt*; and (5) *"It's How We Survive": Faith, Family, and Peer Support*. Table 2 presents an overview of the themes and sub-themes identified across participants' accounts.

Table 2. Overview of Themes and Sub-themes

	Theme	Sub-theme
1	"I Had No Choice": Experiences of Institutional Necessity	Institutional promotion requirements
		Academic credential gatekeeping
		Age and peer momentum
2	"Walking on a Narrow Rope": Experiences of Precarious Balancing	Academic demands and productivity expectations
		Doctoral progression and maternal presence
		Scholarly independence and supervisory subordination
3	"Still Expected to Cook": Navigating Continued Family Responsibilities	Domestic obligations as cultural constants
		Maternal visibility and social judgment
4	"It Breaks My Heart": Experiences of Guilt	Guilt toward children
		Guilt toward spouse
		Guilt toward academic self
5	"It's How We Survive": Faith, Family, and Peer Support	Faith as meaning-making resource
		Family support as paradox
		Peer connection and emotional solidarity

Theme 1: "I Had No Choice": Experiences of Institutional Necessity

For the Indonesian doctoral mothers in this study, entry into doctoral study was rarely described as a freely chosen intellectual pursuit. Rather, participants consistently framed their decision to enroll as shaped by structural conditions that left them feeling they had little meaningful alternative. The doctorate was not experienced as an aspiration so much as an obligation imposed by the professional landscape they inhabited.

"Pursuing a doctoral degree has become necessary because of the requirements at my university. Without it, I would miss many opportunities—promotions, research grants, and the chance to teach in master's and doctoral programs." (Translated, P5)

"Honestly, I felt I had no choice. If I did not continue to a PhD, my career would be stuck. There would be no chance for me to become a full professor. That is simply how the rules work. No matter how many achievements you have, without a doctorate, you cannot become a professor. And honestly, at first I already felt exhausted at the thought of studying again." (Translated, P7)

"At my age, I do not think as quickly as I used to, and it felt overwhelming. Still, many of my colleagues had already begun their doctoral studies, so I decided it was time to start. Because if I did not, I would definitely be left behind. If you ask me honestly, I was not ready. But I was never going to be ready if I did not begin." (Translated, P9)

What is striking across these three accounts is the near-complete absence of language associated with intellectual desire, curiosity, or personal ambition. P5's word "necessary" is telling—it positions the doctorate not as something she wanted but as something the institutional environment required of her. Her framing of the decision through what she might "miss" rather than what she might gain suggests she understood doctoral study primarily as a preventive measure against professional loss. The specific opportunities she named—promotions, research grants, and access to postgraduate teaching—reveal how thoroughly the credential functions as a gatekeeper within Indonesian academic structures, determining not only rank but the scope of one's professional role.

P7 made this structural ceiling even more explicit. Her phrase "no matter how many achievements you have" is particularly significant: it indicates that merit, effort, and experience are rendered insufficient without the doctorate, and that the system operates on credentialism rather than performative grounds. Her use of the word "stuck" conveys not merely slowness but complete immobility—a career that cannot move regardless of what she does within it. Yet beneath this pragmatic account lies something more personal. Her admission that she already felt exhausted before even beginning introduces an emotional undercurrent that complicates the matter-of-fact institutional framing: she enrolled not energized by prospect but depleted by obligation. P9's account adds yet another dimension to this picture.

Where P5 and P7 described institutional pressure in relatively clear terms, P9's experience was layered with self-doubt about her own cognitive capacity at her age, the social anxiety of watching colleagues advance without her, and a quiet resignation captured in her closing reflection—that she would never have been ready had she not simply started. Her phrase "I was not ready" sitting alongside "I was never going to be ready" does not describe confidence or resolve but rather a pragmatic surrender to inevitability. Taken together, these accounts suggest that for these participants, the decision to pursue a doctorate was less a threshold moment of academic aspiration and more a recognition that the cost of not enrolling—professionally, socially, and institutionally—was simply too high to bear.

Theme 2: "Walking on a Narrow Rope": Experiences of Precarious Balancing

For the Indonesian doctoral mothers in this study, the doctoral journey was experienced not as a single demanding role but as a perpetual act of balancing across multiple, simultaneously competing identities and obligations. Participants consistently reached for the same metaphor—a narrow rope—to describe their experience, suggesting that precariousness was not an occasional feeling but a defining feature of their daily lives. The rope they described had three distinct tensions: between doctoral demands and their responsibilities as professional

academics and lecturers; between doctoral progression and their presence as mothers; and between their identity as independent scholars and their position as subordinates within hierarchical supervisory relationships.

> *"Sometimes I feel like I'm walking on a rope, trying not to fall. The expectations from campus are heavy—publications, deadlines, reports—while at the same time, I still have to manage my students and my family. It's exhausting to meet everyone's expectations, including my own. Sometimes I don't even know which one to tackle first. I am just tired."* (Translated, P6)

> *"It feels like standing on a narrow rope—one side is academic expectations; the other is personal and family responsibility. I am always trying not to lose balance. But that cannot go on forever. I often end up exhausted because of the demand to balance everything at once, and that demand also comes from within myself."* (Translated, P3)

> *"It's like no one really understands how heavy it is—being a mother, a lecturer, and a doctoral student at the same time. Each role has its own demands, and none of them is easy. We are also dealing with other people in all of these roles—superiors, colleagues, supervisors—so we have to maintain relationships too. And then the family also needs our attention. It is just relentless."* (Translated, P2)

> *"There is very little flexibility. When my child is sick, I am still expected to submit my dissertation progress and complete lab reports. It often feels like my personal life simply doesn't count. I just want to scream. If I really think about it, I cannot possibly do everything. But whether I like it or not, everything still has to be done. I just do what I can."* (Translated, P8)

> *"My supervisors are very different from each other. Sometimes their feedback contradicts, but I can't argue. I just try to follow both and find my own way, because I don't want to appear disrespectful. I have to be clever about finding a way to reconcile their differences. I cannot just follow one of them—they are both my supervisors. At one point, one of them was offended. It was a disaster."* (Translated, P10)

> *"You are expected to be independent, but at the same time you are constantly evaluated. It's a strange position—you are an adult professional, yet you feel like a student who must seek permission. How do you balance that? On one side is your ego as a doctoral student who is also a lecturer. On the other side, you are still a student. And everyone knows what it means to be a student in Indonesia—you have to follow what your supervisor says."* (Translated, P1)

What runs through all six accounts is the shared experience of being pulled in multiple directions simultaneously, with no clear hierarchy of demands and no legitimate space to let any one of them slip. P6's metaphor of "trying not to fall" and P3's of "always trying not to lose balance" capture not a temporary struggle but an ongoing, exhausting vigilance—one that, as P3 noted, also came from within. Both described the weight of self-imposed expectations alongside external ones, suggesting that the rope these women walked was tightened not only by institutional and family demands but by their own standards for themselves. P2 extended this picture further, naming the relational dimension that the others implied but did not explicitly state: maintaining relationships with superiors, colleagues, supervisors, and family members simultaneously. Her phrase "it is just relentless" captures the cumulative, unrelenting

quality of this experience—there was no pause, no moment where one set of demands receded to allow attention to another.

P8's account sharpens the picture in a different direction. Where P6, P3, and P2 described the experience of balancing in general terms, P8 named a specific and recurring situation: the moment when her child's illness collided directly with an institutional deadline. Her phrase "my personal life simply doesn't count" reveals how institutional structures rendered maternal responsibilities invisible rather than accommodating them. Her impulse to "just scream" and her resignation—"whether I like it or not, everything still has to be done"—convey a particular kind of exhaustion that arises not from the weight of competing demands alone but from the absence of any institutional recognition that those demands exist.

P10 and P1 described a version of the rope that operated specifically within the supervisory relationship, where the tension was between scholarly identity and institutional subordination. P10's situation—receiving contradictory feedback from two supervisors yet feeling unable to raise this contradiction—illustrates how cultural norms around respect constrained her capacity to advocate for herself even when the situation clearly warranted it. Her phrase "it was a disaster" when one supervisor was offended signals the real professional consequences of navigating this tightrope incorrectly. P1 articulated the underlying paradox most directly: doctoral study positions candidates as independent thinkers, yet the hierarchical structures of Indonesian academia simultaneously demand deference. Her observation that "everyone knows what it means to be a student in Indonesia" locates this tension not as a personal failing but as a culturally embedded condition—one that doctoral mothers, already managing multiple competing identities, had to navigate on top of everything else.

Theme 3: "Still Expected to Cook": Navigating Continued Family Responsibilities

Pursuing a doctorate did not release these Indonesian mothers from their domestic obligations. Rather, participants consistently described how family responsibilities continued unchanged alongside their academic demands, as though the two worlds operated on entirely separate tracks with no acknowledgment of each other. The domestic sphere did not shrink to accommodate the doctoral one—it simply remained, immovable, while everything else was added on top. Two dimensions of this experience emerged across participants' accounts: and the experience of social surveillance, including pressure to prove that doctoral pursuit had not diminished their worth as wives and mothers.

> *"Even though I study, I'm still expected to cook for the family. Who else would do it? That's just how it is for mothers. You still have to handle the domestic work no matter your status, whether you are pursuing a doctorate or working. That's just how it goes."* (Translated, P1)

> *"My degree doesn't cancel my duties; I'm still the one everyone calls when there's a family event. The extended family knows I am studying for my doctorate. But when it comes to family gatherings, arisan, events like that—they still call me. Maybe because I have always been the one handling these things. They don't want to know about deadlines or supervision schedules. None of that matters to them."* (Translated, P8)

> *"Being a mother and wife is still my kodrat. Pursuing a doctorate doesn't change that—it just adds more things I must handle. My husband had already warned me early on: if I really wanted to pursue a doctorate, I had to make sure it would not interfere with household matters. So now I just accept my fate. I do everything."* (Translated, P6)

"If my child cries while I'm working, others think I'm ignoring my duty as a mother. As if I only think about my doctoral study. But I think about everything—my child, the house, my husband. Those things are sometimes even more important." (Translated, P4)

"Sometimes I feel I must prove that even with a doctorate, I can still serve my family well. So that people don't make snide remarks—as if becoming a doctoral student makes you arrogant, makes you stop caring about your family. But it is exhausting, trying to make everything perfect." (Translated, P7)

"Sometimes I'm so tired, but I can't complain. People might think I'm not capable. So, I just keep smiling, even when I feel like crying inside. It feels like this is just a fate that has to be accepted. Pursuing a doctorate is fine, but you still have to fulfill your domestic responsibilities. That's just how it is. Most people don't want to know how exhausted we actually are." (Translated, P4)

P1, P8, and P6 each described domestic responsibilities not as something that shifted or renegotiated when they entered doctoral study, but as a fixed terrain that simply absorbed the new demands placed on top of it. P1's framing—"who else would do it?"—captures the absence of alternative arrangements with quiet resignation rather than explicit protest. P8 extended this picture to the extended family network, where her long-established role as the organiser of family events continued regardless of academic timelines. The phrase "they don't want to know" is significant: it was not that the family was unaware of her doctoral commitments, but that this awareness did not translate into any adjustment of expectations.

P6's account adds a cultural and marital dimension that sharpens the picture further. Her use of *kodrat*—a concept carrying connotations of natural, God-given duty—positions domestic responsibility not merely as habit or social expectation but as something closer to an inalienable identity. Her husband's early warning, and her resigned conclusion that she would simply "do everything," suggests that the terms of her doctoral pursuit were negotiated from the outset on the condition that the domestic sphere would remain untouched.

P4's account introduces a different but related dimension: the experience of being watched. Her observation that others would interpret a crying child as evidence of maternal neglect reveals how the domestic sphere was not only personally demanding but socially surveilled. The mere appearance of prioritizing academic work over immediate maternal attention was enough to invite judgment, regardless of what she was actually thinking or feeling. This visibility placed an additional layer of pressure on participants—not only to manage competing demands privately, but to manage how those demands appeared to others.

P7 articulated this pressure most explicitly, describing an active effort to demonstrate that doctoral study had not eroded her domestic commitment. Her word "prove" is telling: it implies an audience, a standard, and an ongoing performance of adequacy that existed independently of her actual capabilities. Her acknowledgment that "it is exhausting, trying to make everything perfect" names what P4 also conveyed through a different register—that the performance of capable motherhood and wifehood alongside doctoral study was its own form of labor, one that added to the weight rather than relieving it. P4's closing image of "smiling while crying inside" encapsulates what ran across all six accounts: a gap between the outward composure these women maintained and the private exhaustion they carried, in a context where expressing that exhaustion itself carried risk.

Theme 4: "It Breaks My Heart": Experiences of Guilt

Participants frequently described experiencing guilt in relation to their children, spouses, and academic work, often expressing awareness that attending to one area meant less attention

to another. Guilt emerged as one of the most emotionally loaded dimensions of participants' doctoral experiences, surfacing not as an occasional response to specific failures but as a persistent undercurrent that accompanied their daily lives. Participants described guilt that operated across multiple relationships and domains simultaneously. Guilt toward their children, their husbands, and their own academic selves, suggesting that the experience of being a doctoral mother was shadowed at every turn by a sense of falling short somewhere. What is particularly striking is that this guilt rarely required an external accusation to take hold; in most cases, it was self-generated, arising from participants' own comparisons, standards, and awareness of what they could not give.

> *"Sometimes my son said, 'You're always with your laptop, never with me.' It breaks my heart. I could only hold him briefly and try to make him understand. But he is still a child, he does not yet understand."* (Translated, P6)

> *"They just wanted to play, but I kept saying, 'Mama's busy.' Later, I often regretted it. Honestly, sometimes I felt envious watching my children play with their father while I sat with my laptop working on my dissertation report. But what can you do, you cannot have everything. Sometimes something has to be sacrificed."* (Translated, P7)

> *"When my child was sick, I still had to meet my supervisor online. Afterwards, I felt overwhelmed with guilt for not being fully present for my child. It felt like I was not a perfect mother, not like other mothers who can spend more time with their children."* (Translated, P4)

> *"My husband never complained, but I still feel bad. I can't be like other wives who have time to take care of everything. He even helps with the kids when I have classes, though he's tired from work."* (Translated, P9)

> *"Sometimes I see my classmates finishing faster, publishing more. I feel I'm not good enough. I feel guilty because part of my energy has to be devoted to childcare and household responsibilities, so I cannot fully focus on my studies. Sometimes I even regret it, why did I pursue a doctorate at all, ending up struggling like this. My studies are not finished, and sometimes the household also falls apart. It feels like I am failing everyone."* (Translated, P2)

Guilt toward children ran deepest and most visibly across participants' accounts. P6's son's words "you're always with your laptop, never with me" did not arrive as a neutral observation but as an indictment delivered in the language of a child who could not yet understand the competing obligations his mother carried. P6's response, "it breaks my heart," conveys not only sadness but a particular kind of pain that comes from being seen as absent by someone whose perception matters most. Her attempt to comfort him briefly before returning to work captures the impossible arithmetic of these moments: there was no resolution, only a temporary pause before the same tension reasserted itself.

P7 described a parallel pattern, but her guilt carried an additional quality—envy. Watching her children play with their father while she worked on her dissertation introduced a comparison that made the sacrifice feel more concrete and more personal. Her resignation "sometimes something has to be sacrificed" suggests she had made a kind of peace with this, yet the word "regretted" indicates that peace was never quite complete.

P4's account sharpens the picture further by locating guilt in a specific, irresolvable situation: her child's illness coinciding with a non-negotiable supervisory meeting. Her phrase

"not a perfect mother" reveals the standard against which she measured herself—not merely a good-enough mother, but a perfect one—and the awareness that doctoral study made that standard permanently out of reach.

P9's guilt operated differently, arising not from a specific incident or accusation but from an internal comparison with an imagined norm. Her husband's silence—he "never complained"—removed any external source for her guilt, yet it persisted, generated entirely from within. Her observation that she could not "be like other wives" positions non-doctoral wives as the reference point against which she measured her own adequacy, a comparison that was both self-imposed and impossible to satisfy. His quiet contribution—helping with the children despite his own exhaustion—rather than relieving her guilt appeared to intensify it, transforming his support into evidence of her own insufficiency.

P2's account brings guilt into the academic domain, where the same divided energy that generated maternal guilt also produced a sense of scholarly inadequacy. Her comparison to classmates who were "finishing faster, publishing more" introduced a competitive dimension absent from the other accounts, where guilt arose not from relationships but from metrics. Her closing reflection—"it feels like I am failing everyone"—distils what ran across all five accounts: a pervasive sense of being simultaneously insufficient as a mother, a wife, and a scholar, with no domain in which the deficit could be fully resolved.

Theme 5: "It's How We Survive": Faith, Family, and Peer Support

If the preceding themes reveal the weight that Indonesian doctoral mothers carried, this final theme illuminates how they sustained themselves beneath it. What emerged consistently across accounts were three deeply personal and relational resources: faith as a framework for making meaning of difficulty; family networks as a source of practical support despite their complexity; and peer connection as a space of recognition, solidarity, and emotional release. Together, these resources did not eliminate the burden participants carried, but they made it bearable enough to continue.

> *"When I'm really stressed, I pray and cry. I pour out everything, all the thoughts in my head, my feelings, my sadness, everything. After that, I feel lighter, as if all the heaviness is lifted. It reminds me that I'm not doing this alone."* (Translated, P4)

> *"I always believe Allah gives trials because He wants us to be stronger. When things get hard, I tell myself, maybe Allah is preparing me for something bigger. That thought keeps me going."* (Translated, P10)

> *"Sometimes things don't go as planned, data problems, family issues. I've learned to let it flow, to surrender. It makes me calmer and less harsh on myself. Not everything can be controlled or made perfect. We are only human, sometimes all we can do is surrender and keep going. Just pray, and leave the outcome to Allah."* (Translated, P9)

> *"Yes, it's tiring, but I'm grateful. Not everyone gets this chance. Maybe this is my way of repaying all the blessings I've received. So, when I am extremely exhausted and feel like giving up, I just sit quietly for a moment and think, I should be grateful I was given the chance to study, and with a scholarship too. That is what holds me back from complaining."* (Translated, P3)

> *"People here like to ask many questions about your study or when you'll finish. It feels stressful, but when I need help, they're the first to come, my sister, my aunt, even my*

neighbors help take care of my kids. The point is, we also have to be willing to ask for help, because if we don't, they won't know we are struggling." (Translated, P1)

"When I talk to other doctoral mothers, I feel seen. We share tips, cry together, even laugh at our chaos. It makes me stronger because I know I'm not alone in this sea. When we get together, we talk about all our problems, share funny stories, and strengthen each other. The burden feels a little lighter." (Translated, P7)

"When something feels too heavy, I tell my friend. She might not have advice, but just talking makes me breathe easier. Because if you keep it all inside, you just stress alone and cannot think straight." (Translated, P8)

Faith functioned across participants' accounts not merely as religious practice but as an interpretive framework that transformed difficulty into meaning. P4 described prayer as a space of total emotional release, suggesting that the act of praying allowed her to externalise what she could not otherwise express. Her phrase "I'm not doing this alone" indicates that prayer did not simply offer comfort but reoriented her sense of agency, reminding her of a presence beyond herself that accompanied her struggle.

P10 extended this further, describing a cognitive reframing in which trials were understood not as arbitrary hardships but as purposeful preparation. Her phrase "maybe Allah is preparing me for something bigger" transforms suffering into investment, making difficulty not only bearable but meaningful. P9's account added the dimension of surrender, not as defeat but as a deliberate release of the need for control. Her recognition that "we are only human" and that "sometimes all we can do is surrender" reflects a form of self-compassion embedded in religious acceptance, one that also reduced the self-criticism that appeared so prominently in earlier themes.

P3's expression of gratitude introduced yet another register of faith-based coping: reframing exhaustion and the impulse to complain through the lens of privilege. Her awareness that "not everyone gets this chance" and that a scholarship made her opportunity rarer still functioned as a check on despair, not by denying the difficulty but by contextualizing it within a larger sense of blessing.

P1's account of family support captured a dynamic that was more ambivalent than straightforwardly sustaining. The same network that generated social pressure, asking intrusive questions about her progress and timeline, was also the first to arrive when she needed practical help with childcare. Her observation that "we have to be willing to ask for help" reveals something important: support was available but not automatic, requiring participants to make their need visible in a context where admitting struggle carried its own risks. This parallels P4's account in Theme 3 of keeping up appearances, where the same social environment that surveilled and judged also provided the infrastructure that made doctoral study possible at all.

P7 and P8 described peer connection in ways that distinguished it clearly from family support. Where family offered practical help embedded in social complexity, peers, particularly other doctoral mothers, offered something rarer: recognition. P7's phrase "I feel seen" names an experience of being truly understood that was apparently unavailable elsewhere. The activities she described, sharing tips, crying together, laughing at shared chaos, suggest a space where the performance of competence that dominated other relationships could be temporarily set aside. Her metaphor of "not alone in this sea" positions the doctoral journey as vast and potentially overwhelming, but navigable when others are alongside. P8 distilled this to its simplest form: "just talking makes me breathe easier." The absence of advice, she noted, was not a limitation. It was beside the point. What mattered was not solutions but the physiological and emotional relief of not carrying the weight entirely alone.

DISCUSSION

This interpretative phenomenological study explored how Indonesian doctoral student mothers made sense of navigating doctoral study and motherhood simultaneously. Their accounts revealed five interconnected themes: the experience of institutional necessity driving entry into doctoral study; the precarious balancing of competing demands as doctoral students, academic professionals, and mothers; the persistence of family responsibilities that doctoral pursuit neither reduced nor renegotiated; the profound guilt that accompanied their daily lives across familial and academic domains; and the role of faith, family, and peer connection as sustaining resources in their meaning-making

Indonesian doctoral mothers began their studies primarily due to external career-driven motivations rather than intrinsic academic passion. This pattern resonates with research from some national contexts where doctoral enrollment is shaped by institutional expectations, credential requirements, and socio-economic advancement (Bartram, 2016; Griffin, 2023; Takashiro, 2017). Across diverse contexts—Taiwan, Kenya, Russia—doctoral students perceive the PhD as professional necessity to sustain or elevate career status (Horta et al., 2024; Terentev et al., 2020). This instrumental orientation reflects global trends where the doctorate is increasingly viewed as symbolic capital linked to employability and institutional legitimacy (Diogo et al., 2022; Gong et al., 2022). In Indonesia, academic promotion policies explicitly require doctoral qualifications, reinforcing structural and moral obligations. While external motivation is often associated with lower initial engagement (Lynch et al., 2018; Macharia et al., 2025; Pipere & Iliško, 2018), participants demonstrated how duty can evolve into commitment through lived experience, suggesting extrinsic beginnings may lead to intrinsic transformation once the doctoral journey unfolds.

The doctoral journey for Indonesian women resembled precarious balancing—unending effort to manage academic performance, supervisory power relations, and personal limitations within rigid institutional systems. Doctoral mothers described ongoing struggle to reconcile institutional expectations with capacity, mirroring the "tightrope walking" metaphor (Utami, 2019; Webber & Dismore, 2021). In hierarchical academic cultures where authority is tied to seniority, women face explicit and implicit power asymmetries (Capurchande & Almlöv, 2024; Robertson, 2019), exacerbating stress particularly when supervision involves conflicting guidance (Tore Johansen et al., 2019; Vähämäki et al., 2021). Supervisory interactions profoundly shape doctoral identity formation and psychological safety (Bao et al., 2025; Parker-Jenkins, 2018). For Indonesian women, power imbalance is compounded by cultural deference toward authority, students maintain politeness and restraint even when encountering conflicting demands. The doctoral experience becomes not merely intellectual challenge but moral negotiation between respect, autonomy, and persistence. These findings emphasize that healthy supervisor-student relationships strongly influence satisfaction and success (Le et al., 2021), highlighting need for culturally sensitive mentoring structures recognizing gendered and hierarchical constraints.

Within Indonesian cultural framework, the "ideal woman" remains one of self-sacrifice, emotional endurance, and moral devotion to family, deeply shaping how doctoral mothers perceive and perform roles. Consistent with global findings (Macaluso, 2020; Sadaf, 2022; Sirgebayeva, 2025), participants faced dual burden of meeting academic standards while embodying domestic perfection. The expectation to manage family, childcare, extended kinship, and academic duties flawlessly translates into "invisible labor", unrecognized yet emotionally exhausting (Baluyos & Alvarico, 2024). Similar to findings from Asian contexts (Koo & Nyunt, 2022; Schriever, 2021), these women navigated constant internal contradictions: pride in resilience coexisting with fear of being judged as neglectful mothers. The Indonesian context amplifies this tension; failing to meet familial ideals invites moral censure, as women are expected to prioritize family over intellectual pursuit. Yet participants

demonstrated remarkable adaptability—structuring study around children's sleep, negotiating spousal support, reframing struggle as strength. This echoes observations that motherhood can foster persistence and creativity in academic work (Refi Sativa & Isti Gandana, 2025). The "superwoman" ideal, while burdensome, paradoxically becomes resilience source, compelling women to discover agency within constraint—balancing devotion and ambition reflecting moral and cultural dimensions of Indonesian womanhood.

The emotional terrain of doctoral motherhood is profoundly shaped by guilt spanning familial and academic domains. Participants expressed guilt toward children and partners for limited time and attention, reflecting "in-betweenness"—constant oscillation between adequate mother and committed scholar (A. N. Q. Phan, 2022). This mirrors experiences across many contexts where doctoral mothers describe guilt as burden and moral compass (Koo & Nyunt, 2022; P. H. Smith, 2019; Webber & Dismore, 2021). Within collectivist cultures like Indonesia, emotional cost is intensified by cultural narratives equating maternal devotion with self-sacrifice; pursuing academic work feels like transgressing social and moral duty to family. Beyond familial guilt, participants reported guilt toward supervisors and academic communities—feeling inadequate when deadlines were missed or family obligations interfered with research. This academic guilt reflects internalized institutional expectations of constant productivity, leading to self-criticism and exhaustion (H. P. Phan, 2023; Schriever, 2021). Such guilt is not merely psychological but moral: it reflects clash between competing ethical responsibilities—to nurture and to achieve. H. P. Phan (2023) described this ambivalence as "surrendering to maternity while reclaiming authorship of the self," suggesting motherhood can cultivate humility, empathy, and renewed purpose. Guilt functions not only as strain indicator but as moral signal guiding doctoral mothers to reconstruct meaning and integrity across overlapping spheres of care and scholarship.

For Indonesian doctoral mothers, faith and social support became intertwined endurance sources, providing emotional, moral, and communal scaffolding. Prayer and surrender were acts of emotional release transforming distress into meaning, aligning with research showing religious coping fosters resilience by framing hardship as spiritually purposeful (Mastiti, 2025; Strosky et al., 2018). Similar to findings that spirituality helps reframe adversity as growth (Pandya, 2021), participants drew strength from conviction that struggle is divine test. Through faith, they found peace in acceptance (*pasrah*) and gratitude (*syukur*), functioning as emotional regulators allowing them to "flow" with uncertainty. Such meaning-making resonates with spiritual resilience—capacity to derive hope from adversity (Hussain et al., 2025). Beyond spirituality, spousal support and shared parenting reflected familial co-resilience, where family encouragement buffers academic stress (Breitenbach et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2023). In Indonesian collectivist settings, extended kinship networks play crucial roles—relatives or neighbors caring for children when doctoral work intensifies. Yet family support can be double-edged, simultaneously nurturing motivation while reinforcing traditional gender norms demanding maternal perfection (Zhang et al., 2024). Equally vital were peer networks—fellow doctoral mothers providing empathy and validation. Such "sisterhoods of survival" alleviate isolation and strengthen belonging (Liverpool et al., 2024; Newlands et al., 2025). Participants' practice of *curhat* (emotional venting) exemplifies communal coping: not to find solutions, but to feel understood. Together, faith, family, and peer ties created culturally grounded resilience ecosystem—survival not as individual heroism but collective moral act sustained by compassion, reciprocity, and belief.

Implications

The findings of this study carry important implications for theory, institutional policy, and counseling practice. Theoretically, the intersection of *kodrat wanita*, extended kinship obligations, and faith-based meaning-making reveals culturally specific dimensions of

academic motherhood that remain underexplored, suggesting the need to incorporate collectivist and religious dimensions into models of doctoral identity and maternal theory. Institutionally, universities and policymakers should examine how promotion-driven doctoral enrollment, hierarchical supervisory norms, and the absence of caregiving-sensitive policies disproportionately burden women scholars, calling for flexible candidature arrangements, culturally informed supervision training, and formal recognition of maternal responsibilities within doctoral structures. For counseling and student support, practitioners should be equipped to address the multi-directional guilt and relational complexity specific to doctoral motherhood, drawing on culturally grounded resources—including faith practices and peer solidarity—rather than applying generic support models that may not resonate within Indonesian collectivist contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations. Although phenomenological approach prioritizes depth, limited participants may not fully represent diversity of doctoral mothers' experiences across Indonesia. Future studies could involve larger heterogeneous samples or mixed-methods to test whether patterns emerge across institutions, disciplines, and regions. Second, the study relied on retrospective self-reports through interviews. Future longitudinal or diary-based studies could complement interviews with observation or reflective journals to provide dynamic insights into how motivations, stressors, and coping evolve throughout doctoral journey. Finally, this study focused on psychological, social, and cultural aspects. Future research could extend analysis to institutional and policy dimensions. Comparative cross-cultural work, particularly between collectivist and individualist societies, would illuminate how cultural norms, moral expectations, and family systems shape doctoral mothers' resilience and persistence.

CONCLUSION

This interpretative phenomenological study explored how Indonesian doctoral student mothers made sense of navigating doctoral study and motherhood. The analysis revealed experiences of institutional necessity driving entry, precarious balancing of competing demands, persistent family responsibilities, profound guilt across domains, and reliance on faith practices and peer support when facing challenges. Participants' meaning-making was deeply embedded in Indonesia's specific contexts: academic promotion policies requiring doctoral credentials, cultural constructions of maternal duty as unchanging, and faith practices of finding purpose through trials. These findings illuminate how Indonesian doctoral mothers make sense of their dual roles through frameworks shaped by local institutional structures, cultural norms, and faith traditions. Understanding these experiences may inform more responsive support structures for doctoral mothers navigating similarly complex terrain.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education Agency (LPDP) for providing scholarship support and Universitas Sumatera Utara as the home institution of the first author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

JS: conceptualization, methodology, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing; HB: methodology, formal analysis, supervision; FA: formal analysis, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal

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