

Issues, Challenges and Prospects of Free Education Policy and Girl Child Education in Nigeria: A Study of Niger State

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Abstract

The study examined the effect of the free education policy on girl-child education in Nigeria; using Niger state as a case study. It also examined the effect of the policy on students' performance in final exams. Both primary and secondary sources were used to gather data. The primary data were analyzed using descriptive statistics technique. It is assumed that once education is made free and the economic factor hindering the girl-child access and participation in school is removed, the influences of other noneconomic factors become insignificant. Findings of the study indicate that in spite of the free education policy, girl-child education is still hindered by noneconomic factors such as early marriage, religion and household factors. The study also demonstrated that free education has negative impact on students' performance in final exams (WAEC and NECO). Also it was discovered that a few percentage of the populace are unaware of the modus operandi of the policy; to the extent that they still pay school fees. Consequently the following recommendations were made: the State Agency for Mass Education should be repositioned to handle campaign of the policy while being included among Agencies responsible for implementation of the Niger State Education Sector Strategic Plan; the tuition fees of female students schooling in the state's tertiary institutions should be subsidized; The state should re introduce the payment of final examinations fee; and the establishment of single-sex (girls only) tertiary institution in the state.

Keywords: Free Education Policy, Girl Child Education, Gender Studies, Student Performance in Exams, Factors affecting Girl Education, Niger State Education Policy.

1. Introduction

The issue of girl-child education has been a global debate for decades. While some part of the world has overcome the hindrances to girl-child education, in most part of Africa the girl-child still faces one or two challenges in terms of access and participation in school.

Academics and researchers have identified various factors which accounts for the unequal access to school between the genders. Wanjohi(2012) identified "socio-cultural, economic, geographical, health and political factors as hindrances to girl-child education in sub-sahara Africa." Kipkulei, *etal* (2012), on the other hand, "revealed that socio-economic, socio-cultural and school related factors are the major obstacle in girls' participation in primary school in Kenya". A similar study in Kenya, carried out in Migori District, by Ouma, (2013) concluded that "factors affecting the girl-child secondary education include socio-economic, socio-cultural, parents' level of education and distance from school." While Oniyama, (2004) listed school based factors which hinders the girl-child education to include "curriculum bias, sex stereotyping in learning materials, teachers and students factors."

Excluding girl-child from participating in school has dire consequence for female gender quality which will affect national development, in terms of reducing the quality of human resources necessary for

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development. Most governments of the world are conscious of this fact, thus enact one or two policies to enhance girl-child's participation in school.

Nigeria has witness various educational policy which seeks to guarantee equal participation of both gender in school. Some of these policies include the western region's Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1995, Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977 (revised in 1981, 1998, 2004 and 2007), the Federal Government of Nigeria's UPE of 1976, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999, among others (Lawal, 2007). Niger state government declared education free in 2007 and later integrated the Girls Education Project (GEP) which is supported by UNICEF, Federal Government of Nigeria, DFID, among others.

Given the importance of economic factors in social life, as posited by Karl Marx (1867), one may assume that once education is made free and the economic factors hindering the girl-child participation in school are removed, the influences of other noneconomic factors become insignificant. In Niger state for instance, the scope of the free education policy includes abolition of school fee, examination fee and other levies (except PTA fee), free uniform for the girl-child, free textbook and writing materials. The policy was built on the assumption that poverty is the major factor hindering girl-child access and participation in school, thus the need to remove this economic hindrance.

The broad objective of the study therefore is to examine the Niger state free education policy. The study will specifically answer the following questions: 1. how has the policy affected girl-child enrolment in Public Primary and Secondary Schools? 2. What are the effects of free education policy on students' performance in final exams? 3. is free education the only and necessary condition for the girl-child access and participation in school? 4. What are the prospects and challenges of the free education policy?

2. Methodology

The study used primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary sources include questionnaire and interview of stakeholders in the Education sector. The secondary sources, on the other hand, include research publication, journal, magazines, newspapers, text books, publication by government MDAs, and online sources, among others.

Questionnaire was designed to gather primary data from parents that have a girl-child in either primary school or junior secondary school, or senior secondary school. Simple random technique was used to select three schools, from each senatorial zone of Niger state, which will participate in the study. 180 questionnaires were produced for distribution in the selected schools. The questionnaires were divided into 60 per selected Local Government Area (LGA); one from each senatorial district of Niger State. The three selected LGA are Gbako for Zone 'A' senatorial district, Shiroro for Zone 'B' senatorial district and Wushishi for Zone 'C' senatorial district.

The field survey was conducted in the rural settlement of the selected LGAs. Urban centers were avoided since it is assumed that majority of the residents in urban center will send their girl-child to school whether education is free or not, most of them are enlightened enough to know the importance of the girl-child education. In Gbako LGA therefore, the field survey was carried out in Lemu village; Gwada village for Shiroro LGA and Chadozhiko for Wushishi LGA.

Three schools were selected in each LGA; i.e. one Primary School, one Junior Secondary School and one Senior Secondary School. The 60 questionnaires were divided into 20 for each of the selected school. The 20 questionnaires were distributed to parents of 20 female Students in each of these schools.

To make the distribution and retrieval of the questionnaire efficient, we liaised with a subject teacher, from each of the selected school, who was tasked with the responsibility of selecting 20 female students to deliver the questionnaire to their parents (as participant in the study) and return same at the appointed date (the next school day).

Schedule interview was also used to gather primary data. The stakeholders in the education sector interviewed are shown in a tabular form below:

Stakeholder	Institution	Number of Respondent
Director	Niger State Ministry of Education	1
Subject Teacher	Public Primary and Secondary Schools	9
Member	School Based Management Committee (SBMC)	1
Students	Public Primary and Secondary Schools	9
Total Respondents Interviewed		20

We selected these respondents because they are on the frontline in terms of implementation of the free education policy.

The data gathered through questionnaire was analyzed using quantitative technique. Descriptive Statistics of frequencies and percentages was used to analyze the data, and presented in tables. The data was run in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for further analysis and graph plotting. SPSS was also used to find the correlation between number of registered candidates and students' performance in West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Commission (NECO) exams. As per the interview data, we select and present quotes that are most representative of the research findings to support our hypothesis.

The secondary sources draw on data from Publications of Girl Education Program (GEP) Desk Officers, Niger State Education Sector Strategic Plan (SESP), research publication of learned scholars, publication of Niger state Ministry of Education, Niger state Bureau of Statistics, Papers presented by stakeholders of Niger state Ministry of Education, online sources, among others.

The data collected from secondary sources was analyzed using content analysis technique.

3. Results/Discussion

The purpose of the study is to examine Niger state free education policy. The study gathered empirical evidence to answers the following research questions: (i) how have the free education policy affected girl-child enrolment in public primary and secondary schools? (ii) What is the effect of the policy on students' performance in final exams? (iii) Is free education the only and necessary condition for the girl-child's access and participation in school? (iv) What are the prospects and challenges of the free education policy?

- **Response Rate**

180 questionnaires were distributed to the participating parents. 38 questionnaires were rendered invalid because they were filled by the subject teacher who was tasked to distribute them to the parents through the students; it is amazing to note that the invalid questionnaires had the same set of answers and uniform suggestions. 2 questionnaires were returned blank while 6 questionnaires were not return. Only 134 questionnaires were properly filled and returned. The response rate is therefore 74.4%.

- **Effect of the Free Education Policy on Girl-Child Enrolment in Niger State Public Schools.**

Table 1: Enrolment in Niger State Public Primary and Secondary Schools by level and gender for year 2003

Level	Girls	%	Boys	%	Total
Primary 1	63, 939	61.39	40, 205	38.61	104, 144
Primary 2	48, 002	57.42	35, 600	42.58	83, 602
Primary 3	38, 770	56.57	29, 770	43.43	68, 540
Primary 4	27, 867	57.84	20, 310	42.16	48, 177
Primary 5	21, 223	56.90	16, 078	43.10	37, 301

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Primary 6	16, 303	56.02	12, 799	43.98	29, 102
JSS 1	18, 714	35.81	33, 539	64.19	52, 253
JSS 2	8, 225	30.63	18, 630	69.37	26, 855
JSS 3	7, 251	34.04	14, 053	65.96	21, 304
SSS 1	12, 573	38.98	19, 685	61.02	32, 258
SSS 2	6, 563	31.66	14, 167	68.34	20, 730
SSS 3	5, 175	32.13	10, 933	67.87	16, 108
Grand Total	274, 605	50.82	265, 769	49.18	540, 374

Source: Niger State Statistical Year Book 2011 Edition (Author's Calculation)

Table 2: Enrolment in Niger State Public Primary and Secondary Schools by level and gender for year 2008

Level	Girls	%	Boys	%	Total
Primary 1	53, 233	40.02	79, 776	59.98	133, 009
Primary 2	48, 938	38.92	76, 808	61.08	125, 746
Primary 3	44, 443	39.37	68, 448	60.63	112, 891
Primary 4	40, 383	40.37	59, 639	59.63	100, 022
Primary 5	35, 828	38.97	56, 119	61.03	91, 947
Primary 6	30399	38.46	48634	61.54	79033
JSS 1	18, 255	36.15	32, 245	63.85	50, 500
JSS 2	14, 765	32.57	30, 566	67.43	45, 331
JSS 3	11, 195	30.47	25, 542	69.53	36, 737
SSS 1	15, 896	36.36	27, 826	63.64	43, 722
SSS 2	12, 046	29.70	28, 517	70.30	40, 563
SSS 3	10, 553	30.75	23, 769	69.25	34, 322
Grand Total	335, 934	37.58	557, 889	62.42	893, 823

Source: Niger State Statistical Year Book 2011 Edition (Author's Calculation)

Table 3: Enrolment in Niger State Public Primary and Secondary Schools by level and gender for year 2013

Level	Girls		Boys		Total
Primary 1	69, 752	43.11	92, 031	56.89	161, 783
Primary 2	56, 837	42.50	76, 905	57.50	133, 742
Primary 3	49, 432	41.47	69, 772	58.53	119, 204
Primary 4	42, 814	41.68	59, 904	58.32	102, 718
Primary 5	37, 410	41.75	52, 193	58.25	89, 603
Primary 6	29, 499	42.21	40, 394	57.79	69, 893
JSS 1	24, 204	37.77	39, 878	62.23	64, 082
JSS 2	22, 705	38.04	36, 975	61.96	59, 680
JSS 3	22, 573	38.42	36, 180	61.58	58, 753
SSS 1	19, 363	36.86	33, 170	63.14	52, 533
SSS 2	20, 883	36.04	37, 064	63.96	57, 947
SSS 3	13, 958	35.89	24, 933	64.11	38, 891
Grand Total	409, 430	40.58	599, 399	59.42	1, 008, 829

Source: Niger State 2013 Annual School Census Report (Author's Calculation)

Our findings indicate that the free education policy has improved girl-child enrolment in public primary and secondary schools. As at year 2008 when the policy kicked off girl-child enrolment was 37.58% which increased by 3%; to 40.58% in year 2013. However, if these figures are compared to girl-child enrolment of year 2003, 50.82%, five years before the policy kicked off, we see that five years after (year 2013) there is still a gap of 10.24%.

Our result in Table 1 shows that in year 2003 girl-child enrolment was higher than boy-child. Girl-child enrolment was 50.82% (274, 605) of the total enrolment of 540, 374 in public primary and secondary schools. In Table 2, however, our result shows that in year 2008, when the policy kicked off girl-child enrolment has declined to 37.58%(335, 934) out of a total enrolment of 893, 823. In Table 3, our result indicate that in year 2013 girl-child enrolment improved to 40.58% (409, 430) out of a total enrolment of 1, 008, 829.

Also, Table 1, 2 and 3 shows that girl-child enrolment is higher in primary school level than secondary school. Our result in Table 1 shows that average girl-child enrolment for primary school level for year 2003 is 57.69% while for secondary school level it is 33.88%; in Table 2 average girl-child enrolment for primary school level for year 2008 is 39.35% while secondary school level is 32.67%; and in Table 3 average girl-child enrolment for primary school level for year 2013 is 42.12% while secondary school level is 37.17%. With free education program being limited to primary and secondary school level, the results for female enrolment in tertiary education level may even be lower.

At the policy formulation stage, the assumption was that economic factors were responsible for the decline in girl-child’s enrolment in schools(although allusion was made to the existence of other noneconomic factors). The Honorable Commissioner, Niger state Ministry of Education, stated this in a ‘Council Note’ presented to Niger State Executive Council. That “one of the important factor militating against the development of education in the state education sector was poverty, which affects both male and female students” (Council Note, undated). It was further submitted that poverty is responsible for the following:

- i. Many school age children being out of school.
- ii. Many not completing school because their parents could not afford to pay school fees, provide uniforms and learning materials, as well as pay for final examinations such as WAEC, NECO, SSCE, NABTEB, NBAIS, JSCE, etc.

Findings of academics and researchers who carried out study on the girl-child education concur with the position of Niger state Ministry of Education. Wanjohi(2012) posit that “the economic factor, especially in terms of grinding poverty and hunger, is probably the most influential in adversely affecting female participation in education, especially in rural areas.”

In the Tables below, our findings confirms that economic factors, especially poverty, have a strong influence on the girl-child participation in school. Our result in Table 4 shows that 67.9% (91) respondents confirmed that lack of money to sponsor their daughter’s education is what will prevent her from going to school. In Table 5 the result shows that 58.2% (78) respondents confirmed that the same lack of money is a factor that may prevent their daughter from completing her school.

Table 4: What factor do you think will prevent your daughter from going to school?

Factor That Will Prevent Respondent’s Daughter From Going To School?	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Marriage	16	11.9%
Immoral behavior of school students	21	15.7%
Lack of money to sponsor her education	91	67.9%
Undecided	6	4.5%
Total	134	100%

Source: Field Survey, November, 2014

Table 5: What factor do you think will prevent your daughter from completing her school?

Factor that will prevent respondent’s daughter from completing school?	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Marriage	28	20.9%
Immoral behavior of school students	24	17.9%
Lack of money to sponsor her education	78	58.2%
Undecided	4	3%
Total	134	100%

Source: Field Survey, November, 2014

As a remedy to the identified problem which militate against the development of education in Niger State, “the state Executive Council at its meeting of 4th September, 2007, approved and made a declaration of the provision of free education at primary and secondary levels for pupils and students in Niger state irrespective of their state of origin, tribe, or religious inclination” (Council Note, undated).

The implication of these findings is that within five years of the policy, girl-child enrolment increased by 3%. This is a minimal increase when compared to the enrolment rate of year 2003. From year 2003 (50.82%) to 2008 (37.58%), girl-child enrolment declined by 13.24%.

The findings also demonstrate that girl-child enrolment is higher at the primary school level than the secondary school level. Also, the findings suggest that economic factors play a significant role in girl-child enrolment.

• Effect of Free Education Policy on Students’ Performance in WAEC &NECO Exams

The free education policy made it possible for students, who hitherto had drop out from school due to financial challenge, to return to school. One of the subject teacher and the Director in Ministry of Education, interviewed, both confirm this fact. That “because education was declared free, students who drop out of school return to complete their studies, student enrolment therefore increase faster than anticipated thereby over stretching school facilities.”

Table 6: Records of Niger State Students’ Performance in WAEC and NECO May/June Examination (2002 – 2012)

YEAR	WAEC					NECO				
	No. of Candidates Registered	No. with 5 Credit & above including Eng. & Maths.	%	Below 5 Credit	%	No. of Candidates Registered	No. with 5 Credit & above including Eng. & Maths.	%	Below 5 Credit	%
2002	17,680	985	5.57	16,695	94.43	18,834	4, 192	22.26	14,642	77.74
2003	13,682	726	5.31	12,956	94.69	17,741	1, 973	11.12	15,768	88.88
2004	15,097	473	3.13	14,624	96.87	17,244	882	5.12	16,362	94.88
2005	14,822	173	1.17	14,649	98.83	18,129	665	3.67	17,464	96.33
2006	17,650	868	4.92	16,782	95.08	23,762	2, 716	11.43	21,046	88.57
2007	18,912	500	2.64	18,412	97.36	29,337	5, 779	19.69	23,558	80.30
2008	27,713	529	1.91	27,184	98.09	30,439	14, 526	47.72	15,913	52.28
2009	27,085	1, 354	5.00	25,731	95.00	29,409	1, 562	5.31	27,847	94.69
2010	28,865	2, 655	9.32	26,210	90.80	28,965	2, 954	10.20	26,011	89.80
2011	26,527	1, 773	6.68	24,754	93.32	26,230	1, 515	5.78	24,715	94.22
2012	27,601	2, 453	8.89	25,148	91.11	27,132	6, 574	24.23	20,558	75.77

Source: Niger State Ministry of Education

Due to budget constraints the school facilities could not grow at the same pace student enrolment is growing. Since government cannot stop the students from joining the school, they are all admitted and accommodated in the available structure as an interim measure. This created a situation of large class size. Consequently, teachers may not be able to give the students the individualize attention which teaching requires. It is also possible that in such large classes, students may not pay full attention when lessons are going on.

The free education policy therefore led to larger class size which in turn has a negative effect on students' performance in final exams. To confirm this hypothesis we carried out a decade analysis of students' performance in WAEC and NECO exams. In our study design, we intended to analysis examination records for year 2003 to 2013; however as at the time of this study 2013 records were not accessible. We therefore amended our analysis to reflect examination records of year 2002 to 2012.

Table 6 shows that in year 2003 the total number of registered candidates for WAEC was 13, 682 out of which 5.31% (726) candidates made 5 credits and above including English and Mathematics. The record for NECO, of the same year, shows that out of the 17, 741 total registered candidates,11.12% (1, 973)candidates made 5 credits and above including English and Mathematics.

In year 2012, the Table shows that total number of registered candidates for WAEC increased to 27, 601; out of which 8.89% (2, 453)candidates made 5 credits and above including English and Mathematics. The records for NECO, of the same year, showed that the total number of registered candidates was 27, 132;out which 24.23% (6, 574) candidates passed with 5 credits and above including English and Mathematics.

It is interesting to note that in year 2008 the performance of students in NECO was at a record high while WAEC's performance was almost at its lowest. Table 6 shows that the total number of registered candidates for NECO was 30, 439; out of which 47.72% (14, 526) candidates passed with 5 credits and above including English and Mathematics. For WAEC, on the other hand, out of the 27, 713 total registered candidates, only 1.91% (529) candidates made 5 credits and above including English and Mathematics.

Figure 1 (Multiple Line Chart)

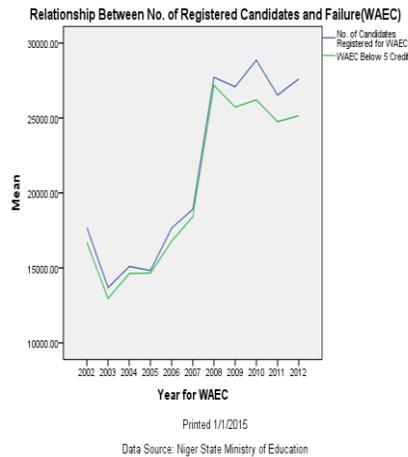
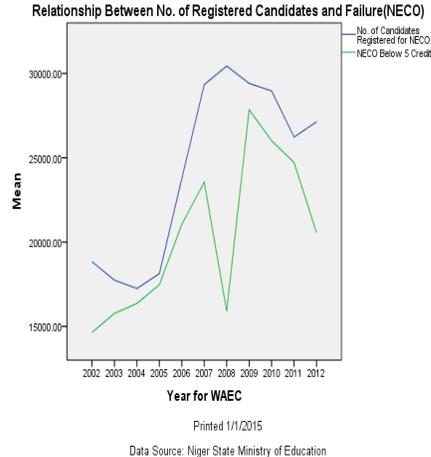


Figure 2 (Multiple Line Chart)



Figures 1 and 2 are graph presentation of the aforementioned details. In Figure 2 we see that the line for candidates below 5 credits dropped sharply in year 2008 for NECO exams while in Figure 1 the flow pattern for both lines moved in sync for WAEC exams.

Table 7: Spearman’s Correlation Analysis between No. of Candidates Registered & Performance in WAEC and NECO Exams
Correlations

			No. of Candidates Registered for WAEC	WAEC Below 5 Credit	No. of Candidates Registered for NECO	NECO Below 5 Credit
Spearman's rho	No. of Candidates Registered for WAEC	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.964**	.836**	.491
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.000	.001	.063
		N	11	11	11	11
	WAEC Below 5 Credit	Correlation Coefficient	.964**	1.000	.918**	.536*
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.044
		N	11	11	11	11
	No. of Candidates Registered for NECO	Correlation Coefficient	.836**	.918**	1.000	.518
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.001	.000	.	.051
		N	11	11	11	11
	NECO Below 5 Credit	Correlation Coefficient	.491	.536*	.518	1.000
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.063	.044	.051	.
		N	11	11	11	11

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output

To further test our hypothesis on the effect of enrolment on students’ performance in WAEC and NECO exams, we ran a 1-tailed test of Spearman correlation coefficient in SPSS. In Table 7, the SPSS output shows that correlation is significant at the 0.05 level for WAEC while NECO is at the 0.01 level. The results therefore suggests that increase in enrolment without corresponding expansion in school facilities led to larger class size which in turn has negative effect on students’ performance in final examination.

Our finding is consistent with findings of other researchers on similar subject matter. Bandiera *et al* (2010) carried out a study on “the impact of class size on the performance of university students.” The study “estimates the effects of class size on students’ exam performance by comparing the same student’s performance in courses with small and large class sizes.” The study concluded that “going from the average class of 56 to a class size of 89 would decrease the mark by 9% of the observed variation in marks within a given student.” “The effect is almost four times larger for students in the top 10%” (Bandiera *et al*, 2010)

In spite of the above facts most parents are satisfied with the quality of education that their daughters receive in public schools. Our result, in Table 8 below, shows that 72.4% (97) respondents are satisfied with the quality of education given to their daughters while 27.6% (37) respondents are unsatisfied. Also, all the 9 students we interviewed confirmed their satisfaction with the quality of education they receive.

Table 8: Are you satisfied with the quality of education of your daughter?

Are you satisfied with the quality of education of your daughter?	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	97	72.4%
No	37	27.6%
Total	134	100%

Source: Field Survey, November, 2014

The implication of this finding is that free education, which has led to large class size, has negative effect on students' performance in WAEC and NECO exams. This is a case of sacrificing quality for quantity. Although poor performance has been a case before the policy commenced, it is further worsened under the policy's era.

• Is Free Education the only and necessary condition for the Girl-Child Access and Participation in School?

Notwithstanding the achievements recorded in terms of improved girl-child enrolment, findings from our study suggest that girl-child access and participation in school is still hindered by other noneconomic factors.

○ The Influence of Early Marriage

Our interviewees, 3 teachers and 1 Director, confirmed that one of the challenges militating against the success of the girl-child education is early marriage which threatens the school completion rate of the girl-child. The issue was so recurring, especially in the rural areas that the Niger state government had to enact a law to address the issue.

In response to early marriage which was the major reason for girl-child withdrawal from school, Niger State government legalized the Child's Right ACT; which took effect from 2nd March, 2010. The law stipulates that "No person below the age of 18 years is capable of contracting a valid marriage. Accordingly any marriage so contracted is null and void and of no effect. A person who marries a child or promotes the marriage of a child below the age of 18 commits an offence and is liable on convict to a fine of fifty thousand naira (N50, 000) or imprisonment for a term of one year or both" (Section 18 of the Niger State Child Right Act, 2010).

This law effectively serves to prevent arbitrary withdrawal of the girl-child from school for marriage. The only lacuna in this law is that the implementation is only applicable for girls below 18 years, once a girl is 18 years and above she can decide to withdraw from school for marriage and the law can do nothing about it; a choice which may be influenced by forces outside her freewill. One of the teacher corroborated this challenge; that "a female student stop coming to school , after about three weeks of absence they gathered that she was about to get married. The school management's effort to bring her back was not successful because she was 19 years and insisted she prefer marriage over school."

Several academics and researchers have carried out study which link the girl-child drop out from school to early marriage. Nyanzi (2001) posits that "marriage, pregnancy and sickness are major causes of drop out among girl children while amongst the boys they include jobs, lack of interest, dismissal and fees." GISTAREA (2013) argued that "some parents justify denial of girls of their right to education to prevent them from bringing shame to the family through early pregnancy... for such parents early marriage is the best way to prevent this and at the same time, preserve traditions."

It should be noted that our results suggest that parents are no longer in a haste to marry off their daughters. Our result, in Table 9below, shows that 82.1% (110) respondents prefer their daughter attain tertiary education before getting married;15% (20) respondents prefer to marry their daughter off after senior secondary school;0.7% (1) respondent prefer to marry off his daughter after junior secondary

school;2.2% (3) respondents are undecided as to when they will want to marry off their daughter while none of the respondent wants their daughter to get married after primary school.

Table 9: What Level of Education Will You Prefer Your Daughter Attain Before She Gets Married?

What level of education will you prefer your daughter attain before she gets married?	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
After primary school	0	0%
After Junior Secondary School	1	0.7%
After Senior Secondary School	20	15%
Tertiary Education	110	82.1%
Undecided	3	2.2%
Total	134	100%

Source: Field Survey, November, 2014

The implication of this result is that the Child’s Right ACT is not sufficient to address the issue of early marriage in a society govern by customs and traditions, where girls are conditioned to believe that marriage is their ultimate goal. Especially when the girl is 18 years old and she is still in secondary school, she may be pressurized into marriage. The issue of early marriage is therefore still a factor to be monitored closely as it still poses a threat to girls ‘participation in school.

Another implication is that since the scope of free education is not extended to tertiary education, and given that 58.2% (78) respondents (see Table 5) said lack of money will prevent their daughters from completing school, majority of the female students will not transit to tertiary education level without some intervention.

o **The Influence of Religion**

Religion is also another strong non-economic factor which hinders the girl-child access and participation in school. Most religion frowns at the idea of female and male gender relating in a close setting. This is due to suspicion of such close contact leading to immoral behavior and ‘unacceptable’ acts between the two genders.

Table 10: Which Type of School Do You Prefer Your Daughter Attend?

Which type of school do you prefer your daughter attend?	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Single-sex (Girl only) school	79	59%
Mix-sex (Boy & Girl) school	53	39.5%
Undecided	2	1.5%
Total	134	100%

Source: Field Survey, November, 2014

To test the influence of the above assumption on girl-child access and participation in school, respondents were asked which school they prefer their daughters attend. Our results in Table 10 shows that 59% (79) respondents prefer their daughter attend single-sex (girls only) school while 39.5% (53) respondents prefer mix-sex (boys and girls) school. Can we therefore conclude that religious reason is the motivating factor for respondents’ preference for single-sex school for girls? Other studies have shown that non-religious factors also influence preference for single-sex school for girls; but some groups prefer it for cultural and religious reason.

In a study carried out by West and Hunter (1993), five arguments in favor of single-sex schooling for girls, as listed by ILEA’s working party, was presented. One of the factors that favor single-sex schooling for girls is that “it is required or preferred by some groups for cultural and religious reasons.”

Our respondents being a cultural and religious people might have also preferred single-sex schooling for girls for cultural and religious reasons. Also, according to Wikipedia (2015) “in Nigeria public opinion regarding sexes in schools is influenced most by religious and cultural beliefs rather than idea that students learn better separated into sexes.”

Along a similar line of thought, in a study carried out in Jos North LGA of Nigeria, by GISTAREA (2013), religious reasons were advanced as factors which hinder girl-child participation in school. According to the study “both Christian and Islamic doctrine encourage women to be taught more in area that make them good mothers and wives. The purdah system practiced in Islamic religion was the extreme case of shielding women from science education and western civilization... in science class girls were denied opportunity of gaining knowledge and skills like boys who were favored traditionally to study science. This affects women’s participation in science adversely.”

If we are to perceive purdah from the perspective of ‘conduct and seclusion’, “in which movement of women in public spaces and interactions of women with other males are minimize” (Wikipedia, 2015), then purdah will be a strong factor in determining girl-child education. Moreover the African traditional belief is such that it is a great taboo for a lady to get pregnant outside wedlock. In such cases the lady does not only bring shame to her family but a ‘calamity’ to the whole community. This is a factor which may influence preference for single-sex school.

The implication of this finding is that parents who prefer single-sex (girls only) school may not send their daughters to school in the event that their daughters are unable to secure admission in the available single-sex school. Also, since most tertiary institutions in Nigeria are mix-sex (boys and girls) parents who prefer single-sex (girls only) school may marry off their daughter after secondary school rather than send them to tertiary school. This will serve to hinder girl-child’s participation in tertiary education.

○ **Influence of Other Noneconomic Factors**

We will not spend much of our energy debating the influence of other non-economic factors as this study has already implied that these factors are underground interfering with the girl-child education. Moreover, the issue has been well researched and discussed by other academics and researchers on students’ participation in education. The position of these scholars is that noneconomic factors do affect participation of both female and male students.

Mikeet *al*(2008) posit that “academic attainment of parents is a key factor that influences the chances of a child dropping out of school in both rural and urban areas.”Mann (1986, 1989), Bickel and Pagiannis (1988), and Rumberger (1983), “demonstrate that communities can influence dropout rates by providing employment opportunities during school” (Mike *et al.*, 2008). Other academics and researchers whose study have demonstrated the influence of noneconomic factors on students’ education include Odaga and Heneveld (1995), Behrman *et al.* (1999), Swada and Lokshin (2001), Holmes (2003), Kakuru (2003), Kasente (2003), among others.

The influence of other factors on the girl-child education in an era of free education was aptly captured in a study by GISTAREA (2013). According to the study “despite the introduction of free primary education in the country, which accounted for an increase in enrolment, a sizeable number of children, especially girls, still find themselves out of school owing to a number of reasons. These reasons are: demands for their labor in the home such as looking after younger siblings, doing house chores, death of mother and looking after the sick member of the family.”

Among our interviewees, 5 students confirm that they do house chores before going to school in the morning and after coming back from school; this interfere with their school assignment and prevent them from reading at home. 2 students said the environment in which their house is located is too noisy; this affects their reading at home. 4 students said they go for Bible study and Choir practice in church after they close from school. 3 students said they go for ‘Islamiyyah School’ (an informal school for learning recitation of Quran) after they close from school.

The implication of these findings is that other household factors are in the background interfering with students' participation and performance in school.

• **Prospect and Challenges of the Free Education Policy**

The free education policy has the potential to effectively tackle the hindrances to the girl-child access and participation in school. However, to fully comprehend the prospects and challenges of the policy we have to examine the policy's objectives against the findings of our study.

The objectives/scope of the free education program includes the following:

- i. Abolition of school fees and other levies except PTA dues in public primary and secondary schools.
- ii. Provision of textbooks in four (4) core subjects: Mathematics, English and Integrated Science for Junior Secondary Schools and Mathematics, English and Physics for Senior Secondary Schools.
- iii. Provision of some writing materials.
- iv. Payment of WAEC, NECO, NABTEB, MBAIS and JSCE examination fees as well as funding of all internal examinations for students of all public schools.
- v. Provision of school uniforms to female students.
- vi. Payment of monthly imprest to principals/Head teachers of school to replace the school fees that were cancelled. (Source: Council Note, undated).

Table 11: Are you aware of the free education policy of Niger state government?

Are you aware of the free education policy of Niger state government?	Number of Respondent	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	115	85.8%
No	19	14.2%
Total	134	100%

Source: Field Survey, November, 2014

Our study gathered empirical evidence to ascertain the extent to which the policy's objectives were achieved. We also investigated community awareness for the policy. Our result in Table 11 shows that 85.8% (115) respondents are aware of the policy while 14.2% (19) respondents are unaware of the policy.

Table 12: Has your daughter benefited from the free education policy?

Has your daughter benefited from the free education policy?	Number of Respondent	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	95	70.9%
No	36	26.9%
Undecided	3	2.2%
Total	134	100%

Source: Field Survey, November, 2014

In terms of the populace perception of the policy's benefits, Table 12 shows that 70.9% (95) respondents believe their daughter has benefited from the policy; 26.9% (36) respondents believe their daughter has not benefited from the policy while 2.2% (3) respondents are not sure whether their daughter has benefited from the policy or not.

Table 13: Has the Free Education Policy of Niger State Government Reduce Your Financial Burden of Funding Your Daughter’s Education?

Has the free education policy of Niger state government reduce your financial burden of funding your daughter’s education?	Number of Respondent	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	100	74.6%
No	34	25.4%
Total	134	100%

Source: Field Survey, November, 2014

In terms of alleviating financial burden of parents, our result in Table 13 shows that 74.6% (100) respondents agree that the policy has reduced their financial burden of funding their daughters’ education while 25.4% (34) respondents disagree.

The policy however, faces one or two challenges. One major challenge of the policy is “the inability to provide 25% augmentation of the supplies of free education materials and core textbooks annually as planned due to budget limitation and constraints” (Council Note, undated). This challenge is collaborative of what we discovered in the field as most respondents confirm they spend money to purchase some of the items that are supposed to be given to their daughters free.

Table 14: Which of the Following Item(S) Do You Still Buy (or Spend Money on) For Your Daughter? (You Can Check More than one Box if Applicable)

Which of the following item(s) do you still buy (or spend money on) for your daughter? (you can check more than one box if applicable)	Number of Respondent	Percentage of Respondents
School Fee	23	17.3%
School Uniform	82	61.2%
Text Book	72	53.7%
Exercise Book	87	64.9%
PTA Fee	100	74.6%
Other fee charged by school	37	27.6%

Source: Field Survey, November, 2014

Our result in Table 14 shows that 61.2% (82) respondents buy school uniform for their daughter; 53.7% (72) respondents buy textbook for their daughter; 64.9% (87) respondents buy exercise book for their daughter; 74.6% (100) respondents pay PTA fee while 27.6% (37) respondents pay other fee charged by school. It is interesting to note that 17.3% (23) respondents still pay school fee for their daughter.

Our interview with the students reaffirmed some of these challenges. In terms of payment of school fee, however, all the 9 students interviewed said they are not aware that their parents pay school fee or examination fee; since both are free. 2 students said they have benefited and received free school uniform. 5 students said they have received free textbook while 4 said the school keep the textbook with the subject teacher; any interested student can borrow and return afterward. 1 student said she has received free exercise book. 4 teachers confirmed that the schools receive imprest from Ministry of Education for smooth running of the school. The challenge is that these free education materials are insufficient.

All our interviewees, students and other stakeholders, affirm that parents pay PTA fee to support the imprest received from the Ministry of Education. The SBMC member interviewed revealed that the community members agreed to raise additional fund to support the school, when the need arise, while

artisan in the community such as carpenters, masons, painters, among others, pledge to provide free labor whenever the school need their services. According to Hajiya Jummai, a member of SBMC and women leader in Paikoro LGA of Niger state, that the SBMC “is no longer only about raising money, but mobilizing other women to send their wards to school and become nurses, midwives, teachers and even better housewives” (Newsletter of the Girls Education Project, pg. 17, 2010).

The implication of these findings is that financial constraint has hindered the implementation of the free education program. Thus the policy is unable to live up to the intention of its objectives and with the volatile nature of Nigeria government revenue the policy will suffer further setbacks in the future; in terms of finance. Also, there is few percentage of the populace who are unaware of the modus operandi of the free education policy; thus they still pay school fee and believe their daughter has not benefited from the policy.

4. Conclusion

Our findings indicate that the free education policy has improved girl-child enrolment in public primary and secondary schools. As at year 2008 when the policy kicked off the percentage of girl-child enrolment was very low but increased in 2013 due to the policy. However, if we compare girl-child enrolment of year 2003 (five years before the policy kicked off) with year 2013 (five years after the policy kicked off), the result revealed that the increase in enrolment is minimal.

The policy has led to growth in students’ enrolment without corresponding expansion of school facilities. This has led to larger class size which has negative effect on students’ performance in WAEC and NECO exams.

Free education is not the only and necessary condition for the girl-child participation in school. Other noneconomic factors such as early marriage, religion and household factors (such as house chore, noisy environment, etc.) still pose a threat to girl-child education. As regards the effort to combat early marriage, the Child Right Act still face challenge in terms of its applicability to students who are more than 18 years. In addition, although majority of our respondents want their daughter to attain tertiary education, the policy scope does not extend to tertiary institutions. Thus, lack of fund to sponsor tertiary education may force some parent to marry of their daughter after secondary school.

Religious belief and practice also plays a significant role in girl-child’s participation in schools. The Islamic purdah system “in which movement of women in public spaces and interactions of women with other males are minimize” (Wikipedia, 2015) may serve to hinder girl-child’s access and participation in school irrespective of the free education policy. African traditional believes is also a factor to contend with.

Budget constraint is a major challenge to the free education policy. This has affected government’s ability to provide 25% augmentation of the supplies of the free education materials and core textbooks annually as planned.

Another challenge is that there is few percentage of the populace who are not aware of the policy, to the extent that they still pay school fee. There is also a fraction of the populace who believe the policy has not benefited their daughter.

5. Policy Recommendations

- The government should increase the policy’s momentum to improve girl-child enrolment to meet up with the year 2003 rate. The indicator 3.1 (Gender Parity Index), on monitoring the MDG Goal 3, which seeks to eliminate gender disparity in school, should be used to monitor gender parity in enrolment in Niger state public primary and secondary schools.
- The Niger State Agency for Mass Education (SAME) should be repositioned to handle the enlightenment of the populace on the free education policy and girl-child education, in collaborate with

Ministry of Education, Faith Based Organizations and Emirate Foundation. SAME should establish offices in the 25 Local Government Areas of the State. SAME should also be incorporated into the Implementation Coordination Agencies for the ongoing Niger State Education Sector Strategic Plan.

- The Department of Research, Planning and Statistics in Ministry of Education should be further strengthened in terms of identifying problems in the state education sector, proffering alternative education policies, monitoring and evaluation of implementation of education policies and the education sector for any potential subversion.

- Government should partner with private individuals and local community members to make alternative structures available to reduce class size. In the face of budget constraint, private individual can be encouraged to build and donate more class room to decongest the large classes. Appeal should also be made to local community to make structures available as temporary classes.

- As regard the influence of early marriage, the Child's Right ACT should be reviewed to make it applicable to all primary and secondary school students irrespective of age. The ACT should make completion of education up to Secondary School level compulsory for all enrolled students. Also, since majority of the respondent want their daughters to attain tertiary education before marriage, government should subsidize tuition fee for female students in Niger state tertiary education.

- To remove religious hindrances, Niger state government should establish single-sex tertiary schools. In such schools female and male students will "attend separate classes or in separate buildings or schools" (Wikipedia, 2015). This is a global practice as single-sex tertiary education can be found in other countries across the globe; e.g. United States, United Kingdom, Canada, India, Australia, Bangladesh, among others.

- The government should reintroduce payment of final external examination fees; while the internal examination fees remain free. This will save the government huge amount of money which can be rechanneled to purchase other free education materials and core textbooks.

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