

Equity and Effectiveness of Tuition-Free Secondary Education Policy on Access, Gender and Rural–Urban Enrolment Disparities in Niger State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study analysed the equity and effectiveness of the tuition-free secondary education policy in Niger State of Nigeria, on access to secondary education and gender, rural and urban enrolment disparities. The study population included 2,467 education stakeholders in Niger State across the three senatorial zones which included 39 zonal directors, 310 principals, 1,002 teachers, and 1,116 School prefects. A multi-methods design was used. Stratified simple random sampling was used to select a sample of 375 respondents which consisted of 7 zonal directors, 56 principals, 200 teachers and 112 school prefects from the three educational zones (Bida, Minna and New Bussa) at 30% of principals and teachers, and 10% of school prefects, based on Aderonmu (1985) and Gay and Diehl (1992). Data was collected using 50 items, five-point Likert scale questionnaire which had a reliability coefficient of 0.77, qualitative interviews with stakeholders and enrolment records from the Ministry of Education for 2003-13. The data was analysed descriptively (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation) and inferentially (One way ANOVA at $\alpha = 0.05$). The policy significantly increased enrolment, from 540,374 in 2003 to 1,008,829 in 2013. Gender based differences, however, continued: in 2013, there was a 10.24 percentage point difference between girls and boys (40.58% and 59.42% respectively), compared with 2003, and there were also significant differences between rural and urban schools, with higher rates of increase in enrolment in urban schools. Even though policy has been implemented, hidden household costs remained: 74.6% of respondents paid PTA fees and 61.2% still paid for uniforms, which indicates that fee abolition alone is not eradicating the financial burden on households. The study finds that while tuition abolition has contributed to increased access, it has not in itself led to educational equity, as there are still barriers to participation, beyond economic, that prevent girls and rural learners from accessing education. It suggests the implementation of policies on free education alongside targeted interventions on non-economic barriers, infrastructure and teacher capacity, hidden costs and governance gaps to ensure that free education is truly equitable and effective.

Keywords: Access, Gender, Enrolment Disparities, Policy, Rural–Urban

Introduction

Education is considered as a basic right and a key element for socio-economic development and sustainable development (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). SDG 4: Quality education that is inclusive and equitable, and promotes the lifelong learning opportunities for all, includes the target of ending gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of

education (UN, 2019). Based on these global pledges, many Sub-Saharan countries have adopted the free education policies at the primary and secondary levels of education to increase access, reduce inequity and build human capital (Lewin, 2009; Oketch & Rolleston, 2007).

Nigeria, like many other African countries, has experienced several changes in the education policy to ensure equal enrolment of girls and boys in schools. These include the Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1976, the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1977 (revised in 1981, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2013) and subsequent reforms, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme of 1999 (Lawal, 2007). Yet, despite these policy interventions, there are still serious problems of access, quality and equity in education in Nigeria. UNICEF (2020) reported that there are over 7.6 Million out-of-school girls in Nigeria and for every 100 boys enrolled in secondary school, only 85 girls are enrolled.

This study is based on Human Capital Theory and Structural Violence Theory. The Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1960) suggests that education is a productive investment, even at the individual level, that is, that removing the cost barriers to learning should increase the number of learners. This is complemented by Structural Violence Theory that highlights the systemic social, economic and political structures, gender norms, poverty and rural disadvantage, which can continue to affect the realization of educational rights irrespective of whether a direct financial barrier like tuition is addressed or not (Kyei-Gyamfi et al., 2026). The two viewpoints are incorporated in the Discussion to explain why access increased and inequities remained.

In September 2007, Niger State in the North-Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria announced the free education policy for primary and secondary schools and its implementation started in the year 2008. The policy was initiated by the administration of Governor Dr Muazu Babangida Aliyu in the State's agenda to transform it to one of the top three economies in Nigeria by 2020 (Vision 3:2020). The policy was created with the premise that poverty was the key obstacle to education, especially for girls, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ibn-Yunusa, 2015).

The memorandum on the implementation of the tuition-free policy for government schools in Niger State, internal policy memorandum (Council Note, undated) states that the scope of the policy is to include boys and girls in government schools, abolition of school fees and other levies (except PTA dues), provision of textbooks for core subjects, provision of writing materials, examination fees to be paid for WAEC, NECO, NABTEB and JSCE, free school uniforms for girls and payment of monthly impress to principals to replace cancelled school fees. The policy was later mainstreamed under the Girls Education Project (GEP), which was funded by UNICEF, Federal Government of Nigeria and DFID, to specifically address challenges of girls' education.

Yet, while these far-reaching measures are in place, there are concerns regarding the policy's effectiveness in delivering the equity outcomes. The concept of “freeness” of education is still debatable since the indirect costs to households are still very high (Kyei-Gyamfi et al., 2026). Additionally, factors other than economics like early marriage, religious belief, cultural practices and household responsibilities remain to limit the access and participation of girls in school (Immanuel, 2025; Oni & Lawal, 2026).

This study aims at assessing the equity and effectiveness of the secondary education policy in Niger State, which is tuition free in expanding access to secondary education and also to reducing the gender and rural–urban disparities in secondary school enrolment. The study has three research questions:

Does the tuition-free policy make a difference in enrolment of male and female students in public secondary schools?

How does the policy impact on enrolment between rural and urban schools?

3. How does the policy influence students' retention?

Consequently, three null hypotheses were set up to direct the inferential analysis:

Ho1: There is no significant difference among principals, teachers, zonal directors, and school prefects in their opinions on the impact of the tuition-free policy on male and female student enrolment.

Ho2: There is no significant difference among the four respondent categories in their opinions on the policy's impact on rural and urban enrolment.

Ho3: There is no significant difference among the four respondent categories in their opinions on the policy's impact on student retention.

Methodology

The study was carried out in the State of Niger, Nigeria which is in the North-Central Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria created in 1976 and contains 25 Local Government Areas (LGA) organized into three (3) Geo-Political Zones (A, B and C). The study used a mixed method of research design which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. The survey research design was used to gather quantitative data using questionnaires and stakeholder interviews were used to gather qualitative data. Triangulation was possible because of the mixed methods approach which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the policy. The study population comprised all the six educational zones of the three senatorial zones of Niger State namely: Bida and Lavun Educational Zone (Zone A), Minna and Suleja Educational Zone (Zone B) and Kontagora and New Bussa Educational Zone (Zone C). Total population was 2467 which included 39 zonal directors, 310 principals, 1002 teachers and 1116 school prefects. A total of 375 respondents, made up of seven zonal directors, 56 principals, 200 teachers and 112 school prefects were randomly sampled from three educational zones of the study area; Bida (Zone A), Minna (Zone B) and New Bussa (Zone C). The sampling size for principals and teachers was 30% of the total population while school prefects sampling was 10% of the total population based on the minimum sample size suggested by Aderonmu (1985) and Gay and Diehl (1992) for descriptive survey research where $N < 500$. Stratified random sampling by zone and category of respondents was used to ensure proportional sample size with respect to the population.

The main tool used for data collection was a structured questionnaire with five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree and Strongly Disagree). The questionnaire included 50 items – divided by construct – measuring the effect of the tuition-free policy on

enrolment by gender, by location (urban/rural), and on retention. Content validity assessment was done to validate the instrument by experts in educational administration and planning. A pilot test was administered in three schools (GSS Lanle, GGSS Dutsen Kura, and GSS Nasarawa) adopting a test-retest procedure with a 2-week interval between the two administrations; the reliability coefficient obtained was 0.77 which was very high.

Data were analysed in two steps. The profile of respondents was carried out using descriptive statistics as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were used to summarise the opinions on each research question, with a decision mean of 3.00 and above indicating positive response, and a mean below 2.50 indicating negative response. Second, the three hypotheses were tested only using inferential statistics (one-way Analysis of Variance, ANOVA) at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Of the 375 respondents, 305 (81.3%) were from urban areas, while 70 (18.7%) were from rural areas. As to school type, 352 (93.9%) were from day schools, and 23 (6.1%) from boarding schools.

Table 1: Total Secondary School Enrolment in Niger State by Gender (2003–2013)

Year	Girls	%	Boys	%	Total
2003	58,501	33.88	111,007	66.12	169,508
2008	82,710	32.67	168,465	67.33	251,175
2013	123,686	37.17	208,200	62.83	331,886

Source: Niger State Statistical Year Book 2011 Edition; Niger State 2013 Annual School Census Report

Total secondary school enrolment increased from 169,508 in 2003 to 251,175 in 2008 and 331,886 in 2013, a 95.8% increase over the decade. However, girls' enrolment increased from 33.88% in 2003 to only 37.17% in 2013 a 3.29-percentage-point gain and boys still accounted for 62.83% of secondary enrolment in 2013. This pattern already indicates that, while the policy expanded overall access as Human Capital Theory would predict, the gender gap narrowed only modestly, foreshadowing the equity findings below.

In answer to Research Question 1 (the policy's effect on male and female enrolment), Table 2 presents respondents' opinions.

Table 2: Opinion of Respondents in Niger State on the Impact of the Tuition-Free Policy on Male and Female Enrolment

S/N	Item Statement	Category	Mean	SD
1	The policy has led to more enrolment of male students	Principals	4.50	1.160
		Teachers	4.83	0.411
		Zonal Directors	5.00	0.000
		Prefects	4.58	0.970
2	The policy increased female student enrolment	Principals	4.55	0.601
		Teachers	4.61	0.776
		Zonal Directors	5.00	0.000
		Prefects	4.57	0.754

All four respondent categories agreed that the tuition-free policy increased enrolment for both male and female students, with mean scores exceeding 4.50 in every category and zonal directors showing the strongest agreement (mean = 5.00). This directly answers Research Question 1: stakeholders consistently perceive the policy as having expanded enrolment for both sexes, even though the enrolment-record data in Table 1 shows that the gain has been proportionally larger for boys than for girls.

In answer to Research Question 2 (the policy's effect on rural and urban enrolment), Table 3 presents respondents' opinions.

Table 3: Opinion of Respondents in Niger State on the Impact of the Tuition-Free Policy on Rural and Urban Enrolment

S/N	Item Statement	Category	Mean	SD
1	The policy resulted in increased enrolment in urban areas	Principals	4.54	1.334
		Teachers	4.56	1.109
		Zonal Directors	3.71	1.951
		Prefects	3.96	1.295
2	The policy resulted in increased enrolment in rural areas	Principals	4.30	1.400
		Teachers	4.39	1.090
		Zonal Directors	3.57	0.787
		Prefects	3.76	1.219

All four respondent categories again agreed that the policy increased enrolment in both settings, but every category rated the urban effect higher than the rural effect (e.g., principals: 4.54 versus 4.30; teachers: 4.56 versus 4.39), and zonal directors who oversee whole zones rather than a single school gave the lowest and most variable ratings for rural areas (mean 3.57, SD 0.787). This directly answers Research Question 2: the policy expanded enrolment in both urban and rural schools, but its effect has been consistently perceived as weaker in rural areas, consistent with the rural–urban infrastructure gap discussed below.

In answer to Research Question 3 (the policy's effect on student retention), Table 4 presents respondents' opinions.

Table 4: Opinion of Respondents in Niger State on the Impact of the Tuition-Free Policy on Retention

S/N	Item Statement	Category	Mean	SD
1	The policy influenced retention rate	Principals	4.50	1.160
		Teachers	4.83	0.411
		Zonal Directors	5.00	0.000
		Prefects	4.58	0.970
2	The policy influenced retention of female students	Principals	4.55	0.601
		Teachers	4.61	0.776
		Zonal Directors	5.00	0.000
		Prefects	4.57	0.754

All four respondent categories agreed that the policy positively influenced retention, with the effect rated slightly stronger for female students (mean 4.55–5.00) than for the general student body (mean 4.50–5.00). This directly answers Research Question 3: removing tuition is perceived to have helped keep both male and female students, and especially girls, enrolled once they had gained access a more encouraging pattern than the access findings above.

Table 5: summarises of the results of the hypotheses testing for the three retained hypotheses, each tested using one-way ANOVA at the 0.05 level of significance

Hypothesis	F-calculated	F-critical	p-value	Decision
Ho1: No significant difference in opinions on male/female enrolment	1.192	2.84	0.312	Retained
Ho2: No significant difference in opinions on rural/urban enrolment	3.805	2.84	0.062	Retained
Ho3: No significant difference in opinions on retention	0.908	2.84	0.437	Retained

All three null hypotheses were retained ($p > 0.05$ in each case), indicating no statistically significant difference in the opinions of principals, teachers, zonal directors, and school prefects on the policy's impact on male/female enrolment, rural/urban enrolment, or retention. In other words, the pattern of perceived impact described above is shared consistently across respondent categories rather than reflecting the view of any one stakeholder group.

Discussion

The results show that in Niger State the tuition free policy is working to increase access to secondary education. Total secondary enrolment increased by 95.8% over the decade (2003–2013), from 169,508 to 331,886. This is also similar to the school enrolment results observed in other sub-Saharan countries where free education policies have resulted in dramatic increases in enrolment (Al-Samarrai and Zaman, 2007; Bold et al., 2011; Nishimura et al., 2008). The success is most significant in day schools, where there is no tuition or other fee involved and education is much more affordable for families.

More improvement is however required in girls' enrolment, as only 33.88% to 37.17% are enrolled while 66.12% to 62.83% of boys are enrolled. This is consistent with the general trend in sub-Saharan Africa where, although education is free, gender differences remain for reasons other than economic, (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007; UNESCO, 2010). Gender gaps in education even after tuition is removed is an important reminder that there are many other factors at play besides tuition. As found by Ibn-Yunusa (2015), early marriage is a major constraint as parents mentioned they marry their daughters after primary or secondary education. In settings where cultural and religious norms favour early marriage, the Child Rights Act (2010) which establishes a minimum marriage age of 18 is not very effective (Immanuel, 2025).

Religious sentiments are also important. Minimising the movement of women in public places and their interactions with males by the Islamic purdah system can limit access to education for girls (GISTAREA, 2013). Likewise, Christian and Islamic teachings that tend to direct women toward the home can influence parents' decisions about women's education (Oniyama, 2004). Girls' involvement in the housework also limits their participation in school, as they

have to spend considerable time on housework, religious activities and informal education (Islamiyyah schools) in addition to academic studies (Ibn-Yunusa, 2015). This is consistent with the results of Oni and Lawal (2026) who found out that family-related factors play significant role in the enrolment of secondary school pupils in Nigeria. These results, in combination, show that the pivotal element of Structural Violence Theory that the direct financial barriers are not the barriers themselves – is reflected in these results.

The higher enrolment growth in urban schools compared with rural schools is attributed to the continued urban-rural imbalance in school enrolment. Okeke (2003) noted that the location of the school influences the quality of learning because of the availability of teachers, classes, and school facilities, and schools in the rural areas have specific problems such as poor staffing, inadequate school facilities and lack of social amenities which make the teaching profession unattractive. It is worse because of the enrolment explosion brought about by the free education policy.

The study also uncovered evidence of the enrolment surge having an impact on declining quality. The policy resulted in bigger class sizes that reduced the performance of students in WAEC and NECO examinations; this quality-access trade-off whereby rapid enrolment growth exceeds a system's ability to provide quality is common in the sub-Saharan literature (Chimombo, 2009; Lewin, 2009). Government's attempt to improve quality, such as teacher recruitment and teacher training, and the provision of teaching materials may not have been adequate to meet the demands of the surge in enrolments. While the government provides textbooks, exercise books and uniforms, parents still buy textbooks, exercise books and uniforms indicating that “free” education is not completely free in practice (Ibn-Yunusa, 2015).

The quality and cost pressures are exacerbated by implementation challenges, which help explain why the retention results shown in Table 4 have yet to meaningfully achieve equitable outcomes. Fiscal constraints hindered Government's capacity to finance the planned 25% annual increase in free education materials, consistent with the trend observed across most of sub-Saharan Africa, where fiscal constraints are likely to hamper the sustainability of free education (Al-Samarrai & Zaman, 2007). Secondly, implementation is hindered by governance gaps: For instance, a 2024 government directive against extortion and monetisation of supplies indicated implementation challenges, while the fact that more than ₦97 billion of UBEC funds have not been utilised due to the weak capacity of the states to provide counterpart funding revealed a serious governance lacuna on the education funding front (Tribune Online, 2024; Falana, 2026). Thirdly, hidden costs are high for the home: 61.2% of parents are paying for school uniforms, 53.7% are paying for textbooks, 64.9% are paying for exercise books, and 74.6% are paying PTA fees (Ibn-Yunusa, 2015), which disadvantages marginalised families and is a direct contradiction to the policy's goal of improving equity.

Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring secondary education policy in Niger State with regard to its equity and effectiveness, and the results give answers to this question in two parts. The policy has clearly been effective in access, as it achieved a 95.8% increase in total secondary enrolment in the decade leading up to 2014, from 169,508 to 331,886, and stakeholders from all four stakeholder groups gave the policy a high rating for having contributed to increased enrolments of boys and girls, and enhanced retention, with the latter effect rated slightly higher

for girls. On equity, the results have been less clear, with girls' enrolment increasing by just 3.29 percentage points during the last 10 years, so that in 2013 boys still made up 62.83% of all secondary enrolment; and all respondents reported a lower impact of the policy in rural areas than in urban areas.

The reason why these gaps exist are in many ways outside the framework of the policy's fee-based design. Even when no tuition is levied, non-economic factors such as early marriage, religious norms that limit girls' mobility, and household responsibilities persist as factors that restrict girls' participation. The above rural enrolment gains are also likely to be due, in part, to the fact that rural schools are less well-resourced in terms of staffing and building than their urban counterparts. "Free" education is far from free, however, as 74.6% of respondents pay PTA fees, and 61.2% pay for uniforms, the costs have not gone away. Other factors that are limiting the effectiveness of the policy alone include its implementation weaknesses, inability to access the estimated ₦97 billion worth of UBEC counterpart funding, and the larger class sizes that have coincided with its weaker WAEC/NECO performance.

These findings, when taken together, indicate that the abolition of tuition alone is not enough to ensure equity in education in a context such as the Niger State; although it reliably expands access as predicted by Human Capital Theory, there remain structural obstacles to access, as identified by Structural Violence Theory, which continue to influence who gains from such expansion. To close the remaining gender and rural–urban gaps, policies that are tuition-free will need to be complemented by targeted non-fee interventions outlined in the Recommendations above, including policies to address the issue of early marriage and cultural norms, investment in rural teacher capacity and infrastructure, measures to remove hidden costs, and measures to improve governance and accountability in education financing.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore made for the educational policy in Niger State and beyond based on the results:

1. To complement tuition free policies, there should be targeted measures to tackle non-economic barriers to girls' education. While tuition abolition is no panacea for the problem of cost, Kyei-Gyamfi et al. (2026) contend that education remains inherently costly unless tuition is removed. Government should increase the implementation of the Child Rights Act, community sensitisation on early marriage and involving religious and cultural actors such as faith-based organisations and traditional leaders on religious and cultural barriers.
2. Government should introduce grants in form of tuition free for female students in state tertiary institutions and explore the possibility of a single sex tertiary institution to consider religious and cultural issues (Ibn-Yunusa, 2015).
3. Government should invest in enhancing infrastructure and recruitment of teachers to cope with the surge in enrolments because of the quality problem. Additional classrooms could be constructed through public-private partnerships and community mobilisation to decrease class sizes (Kyei-Gyamfi et al., 2026).
4. Government should make free education materials (textbooks, uniforms, writing materials) readily available consistently, and put into place measures to prevent, deter and punish

unauthorised levies; the 2024 directive against extortion should be reinforced with accountability measures (Tribune Online, 2024).

5. To correct governance inefficiencies, state government needs to provide funds to complement access to UBEC funds; the unaccessed ₦97 billion is a huge opportunity to enhance basic education (Falana, 2026).

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