Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities and Innovation (JSSHI)
Published by Scientific Scholarly Publishing

ISSN: 3078-7084 (Online), 3078-7076 (Print)
https://www.jsshi.net

ORIGINAL ARTICLE | OPEN ACCESS

Free Senior High School (SHS) Policy and Gender Equity in Ghana: A Qualitative Case Study of Two Schools in the Nzema East District

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Received: 01 April 2026 | Revised: 20 April 2026 | Accepted: 23 April 2026 | Published: 26 April 2026 | Volume 3, Issue 1 (2026), Pages 15–34: DOI: https://doi.org/10.66558/jsshi.2026.1.3

Keywords
Enrolment Rates
Free SHS Policy
Gender Equity
Retention Completion
Socio-Cultural Barriers

Abstract
This study examines how Ghana's Free Senior High School (SHS) policy shapes gender equity in secondary education within the Nzema East District. Despite policy-driven increases in overall enrolment, gender-specific challenges persist that disproportionately affect female students in this rural district of Ghana's Western Region. A qualitative exploratory case study design was employed across two purposively selected SHSs (Axim Girls SHS and Nsein SHS). Nineteen participants, including students, teachers, school administrators, and parents, were interviewed using semi-structured interview guides. Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive approach, using Atlas.ti (Version 8) software. Four themes emerged: (1) perceived gains in girls' access to schooling following the implementation of the Free SHS policy; (2) persistent structural and socio-cultural barriers, including menstrual hygiene management, domestic labour, early pregnancy, and poverty-related costs; (3) school capacity constraints, including overcrowding, resource shortages, and digital readiness gaps; and (4) emerging concerns about declining male participation linked to galamsey activities and vocational pull factors.

Citation: Amo, W. A., Amo, F. A., Mdhlalose, D. (2026). Free Senior High School (SHS) Policy and Gender Equity in Ghana: A Qualitative Case Study of Two Schools in the Nzema East District. *Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities and Innovation*, 3 (1), 15–34. https://doi.org/10.66558/jsshi.2026.1.3

Introduction

Education has been recognised globally as a fundamental human right and a key driver of social and economic advancement (Sackey et al., 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2015). Over the past several decades, access to education has been a central pillar of the global quest for social and economic development, as it not only empowers individuals but also helps ensure more equitable societies, contributing significantly to sustainable development (Moreira & Oliveira, 2022). The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),

particularly Goals 4 and 5, underscore the need to ensure quality, inclusive, and equitable education and gender equality. Nonetheless, the challenges associated with gender inequality in education remain pronounced. Ayeh (2023) noted that approximately 129 million girls were out of school globally in 2021, with girls facing significant barriers at all levels of education due to socioeconomic, cultural, and systemic factors. North and Longlands (2019) further highlighted that girls in developing and underserved regions face barriers not only to enrolment but also to progression and completion of their education, intensifying gender inequities across generations. For instance, in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, Pickett et al. (2012) noted that the challenges extend beyond financial barriers to include issues like child marriage, safety concerns, and inadequate menstrual hygiene management facilities in schools, all of which disproportionately affect female students. Magno et al. (2017) concluded that these disparities in educational attainment hinder women's ability to participate equally in the workforce, governance, and other vital spheres of public life, a critical factor for broader societal advancement.

In response to these issues, the United Nations included gender equity in education as a core component of the SDGs, with Goal 4 emphasising inclusive and quality education for all by 2030, and Goal 5 focusing on achieving gender equality. According to Baghdady and Zaki (2019), various global initiatives, such as UNESCO's "Education for All" programme and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) "Let Us Learn" project, have sought to address these challenges through targeted interventions. According to the World Bank (2021), female enrolment rates in primary and secondary education have improved significantly in many regions, including South Asia and Latin America, due to targeted global initiatives. However, a UNICEF (2020) report further revealed that, while the global average gender parity index (GPI) for primary school enrolment is close to 1 (indicating near parity between boys and girls), the gap widens significantly at the secondary and tertiary levels. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the gender parity index for secondary school enrolment was 0.91 in 2019 (Gyimah, 2021), reflecting the challenges girls face in continuing their education beyond the primary level.

These figures reflect deeply entrenched barriers to gender equality in education, including inadequate infrastructure and financial constraints. This persistence of gender gaps demonstrates that addressing educational inequality requires not only policy reforms but also a transformation of underlying societal attitudes and support systems. In many African countries, gender inequality in education is worsened by a combination of socio-economic and cultural factors. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa, girls are expected to contribute to household chores or care for younger siblings, which can prevent them from attending school regularly (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Duflo, Dupas & Kremer, 2017). This gendered division of labour, coupled with early marriage and pregnancy, according to Boateng (2024), often leads to girls dropping out of school. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 1 in 3 girls in sub-Saharan Africa is married before the age of 18, further limiting their access to education. A 2021 World Bank report found that only 1 in 4 girls in sub-Saharan Africa complete secondary school, compared with 1 in 2 boys (World Bank, 2021; UNESCO, 2024; Africa Check, 2024). Figures refer to sub-Saharan Africa as a whole; district- and country-level rates vary. Readers should consult the Ghana Statistical Service data for Ghana-specific figures. These disparities are further stretched by poverty, as many families prioritise the education of male children, considering girls as future caregivers rather than contributors to the workforce (Dery, 2022). Lincove and Valant (2023) have emphasised that while access initiatives have improved, the completion rates for girls remain disproportionately low, with only 36% of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa completing secondary education in 2022.

Infrastructure deficits in many African schools present practical barriers to girls' education. According to Yunus (2021), a report by the African Union (AU) highlighted that more than 70% of second-cycle schools in rural Africa lack adequate sanitation facilities, which affects girls more acutely, especially during menstruation. Without clean and private facilities, girls often miss school days, leading to higher dropout rates and a lower likelihood of educational completion. According to Russell et al. (2020), efforts to address these issues have included government-led programmes, international aid, and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) interventions, such as the AU's "African Girls Can Code Initiative," which aims to empower girls in education and technology. Despite these initiatives, the deeply rooted cultural and economic challenges faced by girls in Africa indicate a need for more comprehensive policy frameworks that integrate education with broader socioeconomic support systems. Ghana's commitment to achieving gender parity in education is reflected in various national policies and initiatives aimed at improving both access and quality. According to the Ghana Statistical Service (2021), while girls' enrolment in Senior High Schools (SHSs) has increased in recent years, the retention and completion rates for girls still lag those of boys, especially in rural areas. One of the reasons for this discrepancy, according to Baffoe Opoku (2023), is the persistence of traditional gender roles, where girls are expected to take on domestic responsibilities, which often interfere with their education. This is compounded by financial barriers, as many families struggle to afford the hidden costs of secondary education, such as uniforms, transportation, and learning materials (Boadi, 2023; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). Studies such as those by Ayeh (2023) and Akoto (2023) also emphasise that gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, and early marriage remain significant barriers to girls' education in Ghana.

Most national research on Ghana's Free SHS policy has shown a significant increase in student enrollment and that it has become much easier for students to afford secondary school (Ministry of Education, 2021; Nyadzi et al., 2024). Research has also shown that girls still have specific, and unfortunately, ongoing problems that affect them more than boys. These include societal and cultural ideas that do not see girls' schooling as important, getting married or becoming pregnant too young, not having proper ways to deal with periods at

school, and suffering from violence because of their gender (Ayeh, 2023; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Asumadu, 2019). But we do not know how all these complex issues arise and interact simultaneously across different schools in a rural coastal area. In fact, we hare missing detailed, qualitative information about how girls themselves perceive changes in their chances of both getting to and staying in school, and what specific difficulties they now encounter, when comparing a school for only girls to a mixed school in the Nzema East District. This district has its own issues: it relies on fishing, has a high rate of teenage pregnancy, and lacks many good buildings or educational resources beyond primary school. This study aims to fill this gap. Getting detailed stories from the girls themselves will show how the Free SHS policy's goal of fairness for girls is working out in these two different kinds of schools.

The introduction of the Free SHS policy in 2017 was a significant attempt to address these barriers by eliminating tuition fees and reducing the financial burden on families. The policy, which has led to a dramatic increase in enrolment, especially for girls, is a step toward achieving educational equality. According to the Ministry of Education (2021), the number of students enrolled in SHS more than doubled within a few years of the policy's implementation, with female enrolment rising by 10% in the first year alone. Despite this progress, challenges remain in ensuring that the benefits of the Free SHS policy are equally accessible to all, especially girls. According to Asumadu (2019), factors such as inadequate infrastructure, distance from schools, and socio-cultural constraints that limit girls' mobility continue to affect their ability to complete their education. A study by Asante and Agbee (2021) on the implementation of the Free SHS policy found that, while the policy has successfully increased enrolment, girls from rural and poorer households continue to face significant challenges in fully benefiting from it. The Free SHS policy is a significant step toward reducing educational inequality; however, its impact on gender equity warrants further analysis. While enrolment statistics provide a hopeful outlook, a closer examination reveals challenges that continue to affect girls' educational experiences. The need to assess the impact of the Free SHS policy on gender equity is therefore critical, as it offers an opportunity to examine how policy interventions can address both the systemic barriers to education and the specific gendered challenges faced by girls.

Problem Statement

Despite significant progress in expanding access to education, gender disparities persist in many parts of the world, particularly in developing countries (Jayaweera, 2013). Ghana's Free SHS policy, introduced in 2017, aimed to eliminate financial barriers and promote equal access to secondary education for all students. Kyei (2019) noted that while the policy has led to increased enrolment across genders, gaps remain in fully understanding its impact on gender equity, especially among students in marginalised and rural areas. Although enrolment statistics suggest a promising trend, these figures often mask deeper issues, such as lower retention and completion rates among girls than boys. The Ghana Ministry of Education (2021) reported that while female enrolment in SHS increased by about 10% in the first year of the policy's implementation, a significant dropout rate persists among female students, particularly in rural regions. This gap points to underlying structural, cultural, and socioeconomic challenges that disproportionately affect girls and that the Free SHS policy alone may not fully address (Addey, 2023; Seshie, 2019).

Gender disparities in education, particularly in Ghana and Africa, have revealed critical perceptions but have also highlighted areas that require further exploration. For example, Adjei (2022) and Duflo et al. (2017) examined educational access in Ghana's rural regions, identifying that despite financial assistance programmes, girls continue to face barriers due to factors such as early marriage, household responsibilities, and safety concerns during school commutes. Similarly, Takyi et al. (2021) explored gender-specific obstacles in Ghanaian education and argued that socio-cultural expectations often result in girls being withdrawn from school to support their families, especially in economically challenged households. These studies emphasise the persistence of gender disparities even in the context of policies designed to equalise educational access.

Research across other African countries, such as Nigeria and Kenya, has shown similar patterns of cultural bias and economic hardship limiting girls' access to education (Adeniran, 2018; Kimani et al., 2020). However, few studies have specifically evaluated the Free SHS policy in Ghana for its effectiveness in addressing gender disparities, particularly focusing on the retention, performance, and long-term educational outcomes of female students. This gap necessitates a comprehensive investigation into how the Free SHS policy affects gender equity in Ghana, particularly in regions where gender-based educational inequalities are most pronounced. The broader implications of education on social and economic development propel the relevance of this study. Studies have repeatedly shown that educating girls has transformative impacts on communities, improving health outcomes, reducing poverty, and promoting more inclusive economies (Jayaweera, 2013; UNICEF, 2020). Yet if policies like the Free SHS fail to effectively support gender equity, the broader potential of education to drive social change remains unfulfilled. This research seeks to explore perceived changes in access and persistence (enrolment and staying in school) and the barriers shaping girls' participation, in which the Free SHS policy has influenced gender dynamics within two SHSs in the Nzema East District, with a particular focus on the structural, cultural, and economic factors that continue to affect girls' education. The study shall focus on both the successes and limitations of the policy, contributing to ongoing debates on gender equity in education and providing credible information for policymakers, educators, and advocacy groups working to ensure that education reforms lead to tangible improvements in gender equity.

Study Contribution: Existing research has documented enrolment gains following the implementation of Free SHS at the national level (Ministry of Education, 2021; Nyadzi et al.,

2024), and broader studies have identified persistent gender barriers in Ghanaian secondary education (Ayeh, 2023; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). However, qualitative evidence examining how these dynamics play out simultaneously in a mixed-school context (a single-sex girls' school versus a co-educational school) within a rural coastal district remains limited. This study addresses that gap by generating in-depth, participant-driven accounts from Nzema East, a district characterised by fishing-economy pressures, relatively high teenage-pregnancy rates, and limited post-primary infrastructure. By capturing the voices of students, teachers, administrators, and parents, this study adds nuanced, context-sensitive insights that aggregate statistics cannot reveal, thereby informing locally relevant policy adjustments. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do students, teachers, administrators, and parents perceive changes in girls' access and persistence in school since the introduction of the Free SHS policy? (2) What gender-specific barriers continue to limit female students' participation and completion under the Free SHS framework in the Nzema East District? (3) In what ways has the Free SHS policy promoted or failed to promote equal opportunities for male and female students in the two selected schools? (4) What targeted interventions do stakeholders recommend to strengthen the gender-equity impact of the Free SHS policy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Gender Equity in Education

The concept of gender equity in education encompasses ensuring that all individuals, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to access, participate in, and benefit from education. Ayentimi et al. (2020) argue that it is a cornerstone of sustainable development and social justice, aiming to eliminate barriers that disproportionately affect one gender and to ensure that all individuals have equal opportunities to thrive academically and beyond. Sperling and Winthrop (2015) drew a distinction between equity and equality, noting that gender equity goes beyond equal access; it involves creating an environment in which systemic barriers that disadvantage one gender, typically females, are addressed to ensure fair treatment and outcomes. This is further buttressed by Atuase (2018), who noted that in education, gender equity involves addressing systemic disadvantages that often affect girls, such as poverty, cultural biases, and safety concerns, and ensuring that both genders have equal access to learning environments, resources, and opportunities for success.

Globally, significant progress has been made in reducing gender disparities in primary education; however, these gaps widen at the secondary and tertiary levels. According to UNESCO (2021) and Edwards and Girgis (2015), while nearly all children have access to primary education in many parts of the world, only 49% of girls complete secondary school in low-income countries, compared to 58% of boys. Structural barriers such as limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure like separate toilets for girls, and the burden of unpaid domestic labour identified by Ussher et al. (2022) often force girls to leave school prematurely, whereas in some regions, sociocultural norms perpetuate early marriages and childbearing, further curtailing girls' educational opportunities (Fyles, 2017). Odumah et al. (2020) go further to state that gender equity in education is not just about ensuring access but also about creating an environment where girls and boys can learn and succeed without fear of discrimination, harassment, or violence, as such programs aimed at reducing gender disparities should focus on mentorship initiatives, scholarships for girls, and teacher training on gender-sensitive pedagogy.

In Ghana and other African countries, the challenges to achieving gender equity in education are particularly pronounced. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for more than half of the world's out-of-school children, with girls disproportionately represented (UNICEF, 2020). Studies by UNESCO (2020) and Parkes et al. (2016) reveal that in Sub-Saharan Africa, girls are 1.5 times more likely than boys to be excluded from school, and only 40% of girls complete secondary education. Issues such as early marriage, gender-based violence, and the unequal distribution of household responsibilities disproportionately affect girls' ability to pursue education (Kyei, 2019). King and Winthrop (2015) noted that the importance of gender equity in education extends beyond individual benefits, with far-reaching implications for societal progress. For instance, Boateng (2021) estimates that each additional year of schooling for girls can increase a country's gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate by 0.3%, with educated women more likely to participate in decision-making processes, advocate for their rights, and invest in their children's education, creating a ripple effect that benefits future generations. Achieving gender equity in education is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic investment in societal development. This makes it an essential focus of global and regional policies, including Ghana's Free SHS policy, which aims to bridge gender gaps and provide a level playing field for all students.

Enrolment, Retention, and Completion Rates of Male and Female Students

Enrolment, retention, and completion rates at the secondary school level provide insight into the progress and challenges of achieving gender equity in education. Monkman (2021) affirms that globally, initiatives to improve access to education have significantly increased enrolment rates, with UNESCO reporting that secondary school enrolment for girls rose from 74% in 2000 to 88% in 2020, with girls contributing significantly to this growth due to targeted policies such as scholarships, fee waivers, and conditional cash transfers in various countries. Amponsah and Mohammed (2019), in studying the perception of girls on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education, indicated that despite these advances in enrolment, retention and completion rates remain uneven, estimating that 20% of girls in low- and middle-income countries do not complete secondary education. Guglielmi et al. (2021) estimated that in Sub-Saharan Africa, only 36% of girls transitioned to secondary education, compared with 46% of boys, highlighting the gender gap in access and retention at this

level. Socio-cultural norms, early marriages, and financial hardships are often cited as critical barriers. For instance, in South Asia, Ravonmaa and Kortelainen (2023) concluded that girls face up to 2.5 times greater risk of dropping out compared to boys, according to a 2021 World Bank report.

In Africa, secondary education faces structural challenges that affect both enrolment and retention rates, especially for girls. Menashy and Zakharia (2023), World Bank (2021) reported that secondary school enrolment rates in the region averaged around 43% for boys and 36% for girls. Countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, which have implemented free secondary education policies in the past, have seen significant increases in enrolment. For instance, Lerch (2023) studied Kenya's Free Secondary Education programme, introduced in 2008, and found that enrolment rates increased from 1.3 million in 2007 to over 2.7 million by 2015, but concluded that retention and completion rates lagged among girls due to early marriages, teenage pregnancies, and inadequate support structures. This is supported by an earlier study by Muthaka and Ruto (2019) on Kenya's education sector, which revealed that while 90% of girls enrolled in secondary schools in urban areas, less than 60% completed their education in rural areas. Uganda's Universal Secondary Education policy also showed improvements in enrolment, yet completion rates remained below 30% for girls in some districts (Ssewanyana & Kasirye, 2018). Salami (2023) postulates that these findings present the importance of complementary interventions, such as scholarship programmes, mentorship, and gender-sensitive school facilities, in addressing retention challenges. Despite this progress, retention rates remain below 50% in several districts due to poverty, inadequate school infrastructure, and a lack of gender-sensitive policies, as noted by Ssewanyana and Kasirye (2018). In Ghana, the introduction of the Free SHS policy has been a significant intervention aimed at improving access and equity in secondary education. Gedzi (2019) noted that before the policy's implementation, financial constraints were a primary barrier, with data from Ghana's Ministry of Education indicating that over 25% of eligible students could not enrol in SHS due to high tuition fees. The policy has since led to a remarkable increase in enrolment, with the total student population rising from approximately 432,780 in 2016 to over 1.2 million by 2020 (Nyadzi et al., 2024). Gender-disaggregated data from Gyimah (2021) and the Ghana Statistical Service (2021) indicate that female enrolment has increased notably, with the female-to-male student ratio improving from 46:54 in 2015 to nearly 48:52 in 2021, signalling progress towards gender equity.

Retention and completion rates, however, remain areas of concern despite the gains in enrolment. Studies by Addae-Mensah and Amankwah (2020) found that although the Free SHS policy alleviates financial burdens, factors such as inadequate infrastructure, long commuting distances, and socio-cultural practices still impede female students' retention. Similarly, Akyeampong and Rolleston (2019) highlighted that gender-specific challenges, including teenage pregnancies and the burden of domestic responsibilities, contribute to dropout rates among girls, with only about 65% of enrolled female students completing SHS in rural areas compared to 80% in urban areas. They also noted that schools offering gender-sensitive facilities, such as separate washrooms for girls and mentorship programmes, report higher retention rates than those without such measures. These findings advance the need for a holistic approach to policy implementation that addresses both financial and non-financial barriers to education, ensuring that female students not only enrol but also thrive and complete their education (Magee et al., 2020). This is buttressed by Owusu and Addae-Mensah (2021), who concluded that providing free tuition alone is insufficient for girls who face additional burdens such as domestic chores and inadequate access to educational resources. They argued that targeted interventions, such as scholarships for high-performing female students and community advocacy programmes, could significantly improve retention and completion rates. The Free SHS policy in Ghana mirrors the successes and challenges of similar policies across Africa and beyond. While it has notably increased enrolment, the critical issues of retention and completion, particularly for female students, present the need for a comprehensive approach (Ayeh, 2023). Addressing these gaps is vital not only for achieving gender equity in education but also for advancing broader socio-economic development, as enshrined in global education frameworks such as the SDGs.

Gender-Specific Challenges Faced by Students within the Free SHS Framework

Gender-specific challenges faced by female students within educational frameworks, including the Free SHS policy in Ghana, reflect deep-rooted socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. One of the most significant challenges is the prevalence of socio-cultural norms that undervalue girls' education, particularly in rural areas, as in many Ghanaian communities where traditional beliefs prioritise boys' education, perceiving girls as more suited to domestic roles or early marriage. A study by Asare and Akoto (2021) found that 37% of parents in rural Ghana were more likely to support their sons' education over their daughters when financial constraints arose. Such attitudes, according to Wales et al. (2020), often result in interrupted schooling for girls, even under policies that provide free tuition. Teenage pregnancy is another critical barrier to female students' educational attainment. Data from the Ghana Health Service (2022) and Kwauku et al. (2021) reveal that teenage pregnancy rates remain high, with approximately 14% of girls aged 15–19 becoming pregnant annually. Boadi (2023) found that teenage pregnancy is particularly pronounced in regions such as the Western and Northern parts of Ghana, where poverty and limited access to reproductive health education worsen the problem. Studies by Salami (2023), Asumadu (2019), Saltman and Means (2018) have shown that pregnant girls are often stigmatised and excluded from schools, despite policies allowing them to return post-pregnancy. A report by UNICEF Ghana (2021) noted that only 40% of teenage mothers in Ghana return to school, citing stigma, lack of childcare support, and financial constraints as major deterrents.

Owusu and Nyarko (2020) focused on gender-based violence and found that 25% of SHS girls in Ghana had experienced

some form of harassment, either from peers or teachers. Such incidents create unsafe learning environments, leading to psychological distress and, in severe cases, school dropout. The absence of effective reporting and response mechanisms, as identified by Croake (2017), further aggravates the issue, leaving many victims without support. Another challenge lies in the lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure in many SHSs. Basic facilities such as separate and adequate washrooms for girls are often unavailable, particularly in rural schools. Joshi (2014), studying Ghana's Education System at the SHS level, noted that over 30% of SHSs lacked adequate sanitary facilities, disproportionately affecting female students during menstruation. The absence of such facilities, according to Hammond et al. (2020), often forces girls to miss school, estimating that menstruation-related absenteeism accounts for 10–20% of missed school days annually for girls in Ghana.

Asamoah and Boakye-Yiadom (2022) focused on the economic barriers affecting female students, concluding that although tuition and basic fees are covered, families remain responsible for transportation, uniforms, and books, which can be prohibitive for economically disadvantaged households. They concluded that 60% of families in rural areas struggled to cover these ancillary costs, with girls more likely than boys to drop out when financial resources were limited. This economic vulnerability is compounded by the expectation in many households that girls contribute more to domestic labour, reducing their time for academic activities and, consequently, their performance (Herbert et al., 2021). Adjei and Addae-Mensah (2020) concentrated on mentorship, role model, and leadership programmes, indicating female students in rural areas often lack exposure to successful women in academia or professional fields, which diminishes their aspirations compared to schools with mentorship programmes or female teachers in leadership positions reporting higher retention and performance rates among girls, stressing the importance of such support systems.

Sackey (2023) linked climate change to the burden on girls. According to him, erratic rainfall patterns and increased household water scarcity force many girls to spend hours fetching water, leaving little time for schoolwork. The World Bank (2021) noted that in regions affected by climate-induced resource scarcity, girls' school attendance drops by 12–15%. While the Free SHS policy in Ghana has made significant strides in addressing financial barriers to education, female students face persistent gender-specific challenges that require targeted interventions. Addressing socio-cultural biases, providing reproductive health education, ensuring gender-sensitive infrastructure, and offering economic and mentorship support are critical for ensuring that girls can fully benefit from the Free SHS framework. Such measures are essential not only for promoting gender equity in education but also for achieving broader developmental goals, including those outlined in the SDGs.

Perceptions and Experiences of Students, Teachers, and Administrators Regarding the Effectiveness of the Free SHS Policy

A study by Mensah and Tetteh (2021) found that over 80% of female students in selected rural districts of Ghana identified the policy as a significant factor in their ability to attend SHS. However, Owusu et al. (2020), in a cross-sectional survey of SHS students across three regions, reported that 60% of female students identified challenges, including limited gender-sensitive facilities and inadequate resources to address their unique needs, such as menstrual hygiene management and personal safety. Anane and Mensimah (2023) found that although many girls were grateful for the financial relief provided by the policy, they faced daily challenges, including balancing academic work with domestic duties, navigating overcrowded classrooms, and accessing career guidance tailored to their needs. These shortcomings were particularly pronounced in rural and underserved schools, where students reported feeling less supported compared to their urban counterparts.

Teachers' perspectives on the Free SHS policy are mixed, reflecting both optimism about its inclusivity and concerns over its implementation. Research by Asare and Boateng (2020) indicated that while 70% of teachers surveyed in the Western Region agreed that the policy had increased enrolment of female students, 62% noted that schools faced significant capacity challenges. Overcrowding, limited teaching materials, and strained infrastructure often undermined the quality of education delivered to all students, with girls particularly affected by these systemic shortcomings. Teachers also reported that socio-cultural barriers, including early marriage and household responsibilities, continued to impact female students' participation and academic performance, despite the financial support provided by the policy. A survey conducted by Akoto and Nyame (2022) among school heads in the Western Region found that 75% of administrators believed the policy had reduced dropout rates for both boys and girls. However, they also identified gaps in gender equity measures, such as the lack of targeted mentorship programmes for girls, insufficient efforts to combat teenage pregnancies, and inadequate mechanisms to address sexual harassment in schools. Administrators emphasised the need for policy adjustments to incorporate these critical elements if the Free SHS policy is to achieve true gender equity. Parents, as key stakeholders, also play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of the Free SHS policy. While many parents view the policy as a critical step toward providing equal educational opportunities for their children, entrenched gender biases often influence decision-making. Owusu et al. (2021) highlighted that in households with limited resources, 45% of parents prioritised boys' education over girls', particularly in rural communities, which they concluded reflected broader societal norms that undervalue the education of girls, perpetuating disparities that the Free SHS policy alone cannot fully address.

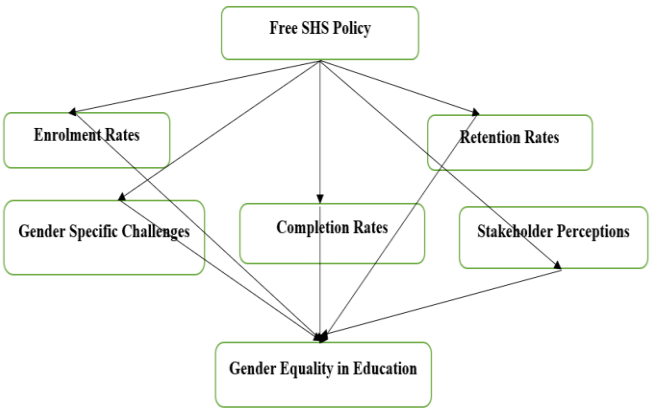
Despite these challenges, there are promising findings indicating progress. A report by UNESCO (2022) highlighted Ghana as one of the African countries with a narrowing gender gap in secondary education enrolment, attributing this success to policies like Free SHS. Enrolment rates for girls in SHSs increased from 44% in 2016, before the policy's

implementation, to 56% in 2022. However, stakeholders agree that enrolment alone does not equate to gender equity, as retention and completion remain critical issues. While the Free SHS policy has garnered widespread support for its role in expanding access to education, its effectiveness in achieving gender equity is contested. Students, teachers, and administrators acknowledge its contributions to increasing enrolment, but systemic challenges, including socio-cultural barriers, infrastructural constraints, and inadequate gender-focused interventions, limit its broader impact. Addressing these issues requires targeted strategies that go beyond financial accessibility and incorporate gender-sensitive approaches to ensure that all students, particularly girls, can fully benefit from the Free SHS initiative.

Conceptual Model

This model is designed to align with the objectives of the study, offering a visual representation of how various factors, such as enrolment, retention, completion rates, gender-specific challenges, and stakeholder perceptions interrelate under the Free SHS policy. Through illustrating these connections, the model provides a structured approach to evaluating the policy's effectiveness in promoting gender equity in education. This is depicted in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Conceptual model for evaluating Free SHS and Gender Equity



Source: Adapted and modified from Dzikunu and Ansah (2023)

The conceptual model illustrates the interconnected factors that shape the assessment of the Free SHS policy's impact on gender equity in education. At the centre of the model is the Free SHS policy, which serves as the primary driver influencing several key components, including enrolment rates, retention rates, completion rates, gender-specific challenges, and stakeholder perceptions. These components interact dynamically to shape the policy's overall effectiveness in achieving gender equity. Enrolment, retention, and completion rates reflect the immediate outcomes of the policy, indicating the extent to which male and female students are enrolling in, staying in, and completing SHS. However, these outcomes are mediated by gender-specific challenges such as cultural norms, safety issues, and financial constraints, which disproportionately affect female students and may hinder the policy's full potential. The perceptions and experiences of students, teachers, and administrators provide information on how the policy operates in practice, offering feedback on its successes and limitations. Together, these elements determine the policy's contribution to advancing gender equity, which remains the study's goal. The model explains the complexity of these relationships, offering a structured framework for understanding how various factors collectively influence educational equity under the Free SHS framework.

Social Justice Theory

The Social Justice Theory, rooted in the works of philosopher John Rawls, articulated the concept in 'A Theory of Justice' (1991). Rawls emphasises fairness and equality in the distribution of resources and opportunities, arguing for a societal structure that ensures the most disadvantaged members have access to essential services such as education. According to this theory, education is not just a right but a critical tool for achieving social equity, as it empowers individuals, reduces inequality, and promotes societal progress. Social Justice Theory provides a strong basis for examining Ghana's Free SHS policy, as it underscores the moral imperative to ensure that all students, regardless of gender or socioeconomic status, have access to quality secondary education. Scholars like Gewirtz (1998) have expanded on Rawls's principles, focusing on the role of education in enhancing social inclusion and equality. Gewirtz argues that educational policies should prioritise marginalised groups, ensuring that their unique challenges are addressed. This perspective aligns with the objectives of the Free SHS policy, which seeks to eliminate financial barriers and promote equitable access to SHS education for both boys and girls in Ghana.

Fraser (2014) introduced the concept of redistributive justice and recognition justice, stressing the importance of not only redistributing resources equitably but also recognising and valuing diverse identities and experiences. This dual framework is particularly relevant for understanding the Free SHS policy, as it requires addressing not just financial barriers but also the social and cultural factors that hinder girls' education. For instance, ensuring access to free education is a redistributive act, but providing gender-sensitive facilities and support systems demonstrates recognition of justice, addressing the specific needs of female students. Tikly and Barrett (2011) argue that achieving educational equity in sub-Saharan Africa requires reforms that prioritise marginalised populations. Their work reflects the need for policies like Free SHS to go beyond access and address issues such as quality, retention, and gender-sensitive pedagogy. Similarly, Vincent (2020) stresses that true equity in education involves creating environments where girls feel safe, supported, and valued, ensuring they can fully benefit from initiatives such as the Free SHS policy.

A notable critique of Social Justice Theory is its perceived idealism and the difficulty of translating its principles into practical policies. Critics like Miller (1999) argue that while the theory provides a robust ethical framework, it often lacks specificity for guiding real-world implementation, particularly in resource-constrained settings such as Ghana. For instance, while the Free SHS policy is a step toward social justice, its implementation has faced challenges, including overcrowded classrooms and limited resources, which can dilute its effectiveness in achieving equity. Despite this critique, Social Justice Theory remains a powerful tool for analysing and advocating for policies that promote fairness and inclusiveness in education. Its principles provide a moral and ethical base for assessing the impact of the Free SHS policy on gender equity, emphasising the need for continuous efforts to address structural and systemic inequalities. The Social Justice Theory is particularly suitable for this study, as it aligns closely with the study's core objective of examining the impact of Ghana's Free SHS policy on gender equity. The emphasis on fairness, equality, and the moral imperative to address systemic barriers makes it an ideal framework for understanding how the policy addresses gender disparities in education. Social Justice Theory not only advocates equal access to education but also calls for policies that recognise and respond to the unique challenges faced by marginalised groups, such as female students under the Free SHS policy. Its focus on both the redistribution of resources and the recognition of diverse needs makes it an influential tool for assessing the policy's effectiveness in promoting gender equity in education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018), focusing on two purposively selected SHSs, Axim Girls SHS and Nsein SHS in the Nzema East District of Ghana's Western Region. A case study approach is appropriate because it enables in-depth, context-sensitive exploration of a contemporary policy phenomenon in its real-world setting (Yin, 2018). A qualitative orientation enables a rich description of participants' perceptions and experiences, as well as the contextual factors shaping girls' educational trajectories under the Free SHS policy. The two-school design was selected to capture contrasting institutional contexts: a single-sex girls' school and a co-educational school, both operating within the same district, thereby enabling comparative insights while maintaining analytical depth.

Population of the Study

The research was conducted in the Nzema East District of the Western Region, Ghana. The target population comprised individuals directly or indirectly associated with the implementation and impact of the Free SHS policy. This included students currently enrolled in the two selected schools: specifically, Axim Girls SHS and Nsein SHS, teachers, school administrators, and parents. These stakeholders were chosen because they provide first-hand accounts of enrolment trends, retention issues, completion rates, and the operational realities of the policy.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Participants were drawn from Axim Girls SHS and Nsein SHS in the Nzema East District. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed direct knowledge and experience relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria required that students be currently enrolled in Forms 1–3; teachers and administrators have at least one year of service under the Free SHS policy; and parents or guardians have at least one child enrolled in either school during the study period. A total of 19 participants were recruited, comprising 8 students (4 from each school), 5 teachers, 3 school administrators (including headteachers), and 3 parents or guardians; see Table 1: demographic characteristics of respondents. The student participants were drawn from various grade levels to capture diversity in their experiences with enrolment, retention, and the challenges they face under the policy. In terms of gender distribution, 12 participants were female, and 7 were male. The sample was evenly distributed between the two schools, with 9 participants from Axim Girls SHS and 10 from Nsein SHS. The sample size was determined by the need to collect rich, detailed data while staying within the study's time and resource constraints.

Data saturation was reached, with the researchers continuing interviews until no new themes emerged, ensuring that the findings adequately captured the range of stakeholder perspectives. This sample size was considered appropriate for a qualitative case study in which the aim is depth of understanding rather than statistical representation; data collection continued until informational sufficiency was reached, with no substantially new themes emerging across the final interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data were subjected to thematic analysis using the Atlas.ti (version 8) programme. Atlas.ti software enabled efficient data management and a more comprehensive analysis of the importance of recorded data (Manyerere, 2015). Atlas.ti enabled the processing and assessment of several media formats, such as text, images, videos, and audio (Wästerfors et al., 2014). Participants were identified through the school administration and invited to participate voluntarily, with assurances of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. The demographic characteristics highlight a diverse group of respondents, essential for exploring the Free SHS policy's role in fostering gender equity. The emphasis on female perspectives, a mix of experienced and newer teachers, and representation from different types of schools enrich the study's analysis. This demographic diversity ensures that the findings comprehensively address the study's objectives, particularly the policy's impact on enrolment, retention, and completion rates, as well as its effectiveness in overcoming gender-specific challenges.

Data Collection Instrument and Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews conducted between August and September 2023.

An interview guide was developed based on the study's conceptual model and a review of relevant literature and was piloted with two respondents (not included in the final sample) to assess clarity and flow. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, was conducted in English or Fante (with researcher translation), and took place in a private setting at each school to ensure confidentiality. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed against the recordings for accuracy before analysis. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis: (1) data familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) systematic generation of initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing and refining themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Coding was conducted manually by the lead researcher, with a second researcher independently coding a 20% subset of transcripts; discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking (returning summary findings to five participants for review), triangulation across participant roles (students, teachers, administrators, parents), maintenance of a reflexivity journal throughout the study, and peer debriefing with a colleague familiar with qualitative research in Ghanaian education contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This cross-verification of themes from various data sources enhanced the analytical rigour of the interpretation. To aid transferability, comprehensive descriptions of the research environment and participant attributes are provided, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to analogous contexts. To ensure dependability, a complete audit trail was maintained, documenting all research steps, from data collection to analysis. Confirmability was maintained through the consistent application of reflexivity, which reduced researcher bias and ensured that the findings were rooted in participants' experiences rather than researcher assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology). Before participation, all individuals were provided with clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all adult participants; for students under eighteen, parental or guardian consent was secured in addition to the students' own assent. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; data were coded and stored securely, and any identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Special care was taken when discussing sensitive topics such as teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence, ensuring that interviews were conducted in a safe and supportive environment.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Perceived access gains for girls after free SHS

Impact of Free SHS Policy on Enrolment, Retention, and Completion Rates

A significant majority of respondents highlighted a substantial increase in overall enrolment following the implementation of the Free SHS policy. This increase is attributed to the elimination of financial barriers, allowing more students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to access secondary education. Statements from some teachers, such as "The numbers have shot up" and "enrolment has gone up," illustrate this trend. This finding aligns with Addae-Mensah (2000), who noted that reducing the financial burden of education increases access and participation rates. The data suggest a marked improvement in female enrolment in SHSs. Respondents attributed this change to growing awareness of the importance of female education and the removal of financial constraints, which had previously favoured male education in many households. A respondent, a teacher from Nsein SHS, has this to share, "Now we have more girls coming in because there has been an awareness on women empowerment through education," while another teacher from the same school added, "Before the Free SHS, only a few girls from my community were attending SHS. Now, most of my friends from junior high are here." These insights are consistent with studies such as those by Lloyd and Mensch (2008), which emphasise that policies aimed at reducing costs and creating awareness can significantly improve gender equity in education.

We looked at official school information from the Nzema East Municipal Assembly and the yearly lists of students from the Ghana Education Service (GES) to go alongside what students and others told us. This official information provides numbers to confirm improvements in how many people are getting to school and to show that difficulties with students staying in school and finishing persist. Table 1 breaks down the number of students enrolled, those who continue in school, and those who finish at Axim Girls SHS and Nsein SHS for certain years before and after the Free SHS policy (2016 to 2023). The information came from education reports for the Municipal area and GES Education Management Information System (EMIS) data collections.

Table 1. Enrolment, Retention, and Completion Rates at Axim Girls SHS and Nsein SHS, Nzema East District (2016–2023)

Year	School	Total Enrolment	Female Enrolment (%)	Male Enrolment (%)	Retention Rate (%) Females / Males	Completion Rate (%) Females / Males

2016 (Pre-Free SHS)	Axim Girls SHS	850	100	0	72 / –	65 / –
2016 (Pre-Free SHS)	Nsein SHS	1,050	48	52	78 / 75	70 / 68
2018 (Post-Free SHS)	Axim Girls SHS	1,150	100	0	81 / –	74 / –
2018 (Post-Free SHS)	Nsein SHS	1,620	51	49	84 / 79	77 / 74
2020	Axim Girls SHS	1,320	100	0	83 / –	76 / –
2020	Nsein SHS	1,990	52	48	85 / 80	79 / 76
2022–2023	Axim Girls SHS	1,410	100	0	84 / –	78 / –
2022–2023	Nsein SHS	2,050	53	47	86 / 81	81 / 78

Note. Retention rate is the percentage of students who started at a school and continued onto the next year without leaving, and completion rate is the percentage of students in Year 11 (Form 3) who took and passed their West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). The figures come from the Nzema East Municipal Assembly (2021), the GES EMIS Annual Census (2020-2023), and the Ministry of Education (2021). Enrolment numbers have been rounded to the nearest 10, and percentages to the nearest whole number.

Looking at Table 1, the school's own figures confirm the substantial increase in student numbers from 2017 onwards. At Axim Girls SHS, the total number of students went up by 66% from 2016 to 2023, and at Nsein SHS (which has both boys and girls), it went up by 95% - and this agrees with what people taking part in the study said, that a lot more students have arrived and that more girls are getting into secondary school. At Nsein SHS, the proportion of girls improved considerably, rising from 48% to 53%, which aligns with the national trend of the girls-to-boys ratio shifting from 46:54 in 2015 to roughly 48:52 by 2021. After Free SHS began, both the number of students staying in school (retention) and the number of students who passed their WASSCE (completion) improved, especially for girls. At Axim Girls, retention went up by 12 percentage points and completion by 13; at Nsein SHS, they increased by 8 and 11 points, respectively. These improvements support what people involved in the study thought: because they do not have to pay, more girls can stay in education. However, the numbers also support the issues reported about how things are set up and cultural norms. Even in the 2022-2023 school year, fewer than 81% of girls completed their courses, so removing fees alone has not solved everything. The small but continuing difference in completion rates between boys and girls at Nsein SHS also reflects worries from those in the study about early pregnancy, girls doing a lot of housework, and boys dropping out because of illegal gold mining ("galamsey"), all of which affect boys and girls differently when it comes to staying in school. The hard numbers from the records make the main point of the research stronger: the Free SHS scheme has definitely meant more people can get to school (particularly girls at single-sex schools), but problems with students staying in school and finishing their courses show that we also need other help (like providing menstrual products, schemes for girls to return to education, and better buildings) - these were the things which came up in the detailed analysis of the themes.

Declining Male Enrolment and Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors

Interestingly, some respondents observed a decline in male enrolment in recent years, with factors such as galamsey (illegal mining) and the increasing preference for technical schools cited as reasons. One respondent, a student from Nsein SHS, noted, "Initially, it was large. Now it is dwindling for the boys, and it is affecting the total numbers. Galamsey and technical schools are the reasons why boys are not staying in school." This concern was echoed by another, who stated, "The male child needs to be empowered too." This trend indicates that while the policy has made education more accessible, external socio-economic factors continue to influence male participation. Respondents emphasised that the Free SHS policy has alleviated financial constraints that previously prevented many students, particularly girls, from accessing secondary education. A respondent from Axim Girls SHS has this to share, "If not for Free SHS, other girls and I would have been married off or working in the market, farm, or fish mongering with our parents." Another student from Axim Girls added, "The policy has helped many of us because some parents preferred to send boys to school first, but now both boys and girls can go since it is free." These narratives highlight the critical role of the Free SHS policy in addressing entrenched socio-cultural biases and economic barriers. The Free SHS policy has significantly increased overall enrolment in secondary schools, with a notable rise in female participation, thereby promoting gender equity. However, the declining male enrolment due to external socio-economic factors warrants attention. These findings underscore the importance of policies that address financial barriers to education, as well as targeted interventions to address challenges specific to different groups. The observed trends align with research by Addae-Mensah (2000) and Lloyd and Mensch (2008), affirming the transformative impact of inclusive education policies.

Theme 2: Persistent barriers (menstrual hygiene, poverty, domestic labour, safety)

Financial Constraints

Although the Free SHS policy alleviates some financial burdens, poverty remains a significant barrier. Respondents (teachers from both schools) noted that "It is still finance. Though it is free, they still need money for other essential things," and "The food given to them is nothing to write home about [original phrase used by participant]. Because of poverty, some of them steal money to buy food or their friends' provisions at the dormitories." The financial inability to afford supplementary educational materials, food, and personal care items continues to impede female students' access to education. These findings align with the work of Lloyd and Mensch (2008), who argued that financial barriers, gender-specific challenges, and inadequate school resources disproportionately affect girls' education, particularly in developing countries. The lack of access to menstrual hygiene products and the influence of gendered stereotypes on subject choices are well-documented as factors that hinder girls' educational participation and performance (Sommer et al., 2015). The challenges female students face under the Free SHS policy are multifaceted, spanning inadequate resources, infrastructure deficits, gender-related issues, and lingering financial barriers. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, such as improved provision of textbooks and laboratory equipment, enhanced infrastructural development, initiatives to combat gender stereotypes, and support for menstrual hygiene. These efforts are essential to ensuring equitable access to education for all students.

Lack of parental support for girls, economic pressures, and gender roles and stereotypes

A prominent theme is the lack of parental support for girls' education, often rooted in illiteracy and traditional beliefs. Some of the respondents (students from both schools) noted that "Some of our parents think that girls do not need much education because we will marry and stay home," and "In this community, after junior high school, parents prefer that their girls marry and give birth. They cherish this above education." This limited parental interest is compounded by irresponsible parenting and broken homes, as highlighted by one respondent, a teacher: "Broken homes and illiteracy among parents mean they don't let students learn or care about their academic well-being." Female students face significant economic pressures that interfere with their education. Some respondents, students, mentioned that "There is pressure on some girls to sell at the market to support their families," while others noted the financial strain caused by poverty, leading to teenage pregnancy or transactional relationships: "Parents push their daughters to go out there and have affairs with men to provide for them." Additionally, fishing as a dominant livelihood affects girls' participation, as they are often expected to assist with economic activities rather than focus on their studies: "Girls are often pressured to stay home and help with chores or take care of siblings." Female students face unique challenges related to misconceptions about gender roles in education and a lack of essential personal care items like sanitary pads. Some respondents (students from Nsein SHS) observed, "There are misconceptions about some subjects. They think these courses are reserved for boys," while others (students from Axim Girls SHS) highlighted the absence of support for menstrual hygiene: "The sanitary pads we need are expensive, and it affects us during menstruation. Some of us stay home during that time." Gendered expectations play a significant role in shaping the academic engagement of female students. Traditional views often discourage girls from pursuing higher education, as one respondent, a teacher from Nsein SHS, noted: "In this community, boys are expected to work (fishing), and girls are expected to marry early and give birth or sell fish." Another teacher from Axim SHS highlighted how parents' choices limit girls' academic growth: "Before they come to school, they are brainwashed on the courses to take. Even if advised by teachers, they follow their parents' counsel."

Peer and Societal Influences

Peer pressure and societal norms further undermine girls' education. Teenage motherhood, for example, perpetuates a generational cycle of educational apathy. This is what one teacher from Nsein SHS has to say: "Peer pressure to belong and look cool makes them resort to going to men to provide their needs, resulting in teenage pregnancy. Even when they get pregnant, they refuse to come back to school because they don't see it as important." This is compounded by the broader cultural undervaluation of education in some communities, as one respondent, a teacher from Axim Girls SHS, explained: "Cultural expectations make some girls focus less on school. School is not really seen as important in this community." These findings align with the work of Gitari (2024), who emphasised how socio-cultural norms and economic pressures disproportionately hinder girls' educational attainment in developing countries. Lloyd and Young (2009) also highlighted that societal attitudes toward girls' education and traditional gender roles create significant barriers, particularly in rural and low-income areas. The prevalence of early marriages, teenage pregnancies, and economic pressures noted in this analysis echoes these findings, suggesting the need for community-wide interventions to shift cultural expectations and enhance parental support for girls' education. The societal and cultural expectations affecting female students' participation and performance in school are deeply rooted in parental attitudes, economic constraints, gender roles, and societal norms. Addressing these challenges requires multi-faceted approaches, including raising awareness about the importance of girls' education, implementing policies to support girls affected by economic and social pressures, and challenging gendered stereotypes through community engagement and education. These efforts are essential to creating an enabling environment in which female students can participate fully and excel academically.

Theme 3: School capacity constraints (resources, overcrowding, digital readiness)

Inadequate Educational Resources and Infrastructural Deficiencies

A recurrent theme is the inadequacy of educational materials, particularly textbooks for elective subjects, ICT tools, and laboratory equipment. Respondents who are teachers from the

two SHS noted that "The government does not provide textbooks for elective subjects, so parents have to purchase them," and "We do not always have enough textbooks, especially for science and math." This inadequacy extends to digital learning resources, with one respondent, a teacher from Nsein SHS, highlighting potential future struggles: "There's a new curriculum for the 2024/2025 academic year. Most of their learning materials will be digital. They may struggle with getting conversant with using the IT tools, especially in rural areas." The lack of essential infrastructure, such as properly equipped libraries, computer labs, and science laboratories, was identified as a significant challenge. Respondents (students from Axim Girls SHS) pointed out that "We do not have access to educational resources. No computer lab," and "The Science lab does not have enough equipment to practice what we are taught in class." Additionally, overcrowding in schools affects access to facilities like dining halls, with one participant explaining, "Due to our large number, we go to dining in batches, which delays our time."

Overcrowding-Induced Strain on Teaching and Learning

It is not just about not having enough actual things like supplies and labs, but the sheer number of students is now a major problem for both how well students are taught and how they feel. People at both schools repeatedly said that classes have far too many students since lots more signed up when Free SHS began. As a teacher at Nsein SHS put it, there are over sixty in a classroom designed for forty, making it impossible to give each student what they need and causing slower students, and particularly quiet girls, to be missed. A leader at Axim Girls SHS said the library and science lab were built for fewer students. Now, ten (10) at a time are sharing equipment, and lots of students do not get to do experiments before their tests. Being so crammed in also makes other difficulties worse; for example, students are competing for beds in the dorms and for bathroom use. One girl from Nsein SHS said they have three to a bed in the dorms, there's absolutely no privacy, and because of all the bodies so close together, some girls have been ill. Asare and Boateng's 2020 research show 62% of teachers in Ghana's Western Region believe overcrowding is a major obstacle to good teaching with Free SHS. This pressure on buildings and facilities not only lowers learning standards but also makes girls feel vulnerable and unsupported, so we really need to build more suitable buildings while admitting more students.

Theme 4: Emerging concerns about boys' participation (Galamsey/TVET pull factors)

Increased Access to Education, Promotion of Gender Equality, and Encouragement of STEM Education for Girls

The most frequently mentioned benefit of the Free SHS policy was its role in expanding access to education for both boys and girls. Respondents consistently noted that the policy had removed financial barriers, enabling students from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend school. As one participant explained, "Because of free tuition, it opened the doors for everyone to access secondary education." Another added, "Girls who would have been selling fish or going to the farm or married are now in school because of Free SHS." This aligns with Kuteesa et al. (2024), which highlights the importance of free education policies in increasing school enrolment rates, especially among marginalised groups. Respondents highlighted how the policy has helped to address gender disparities in education by ensuring equal opportunities for boys and girls. Many noted that parents no longer have to choose between educating their sons and daughters due to financial constraints. One participant stated, "My parents did not have to choose between me and my brothers coming to school because of Free SHS." Additionally, some respondents observed that the policy has influenced teacher behaviour, fostering more equitable treatment of male and female students. For instance, one noted, "Teachers are being sensitised on gender equality, which affects the way they treat both sexes, so students, especially females, do not feel discriminated against. Unterhalter (2013) supports this, emphasising the role of education policies in reducing gender inequality by promoting inclusive practices and equitable access to resources. The policy's emphasis on promoting STEM education was also identified as a significant contributor to creating equal opportunities. Respondents noted that the policy encourages girls to pursue traditionally male-dominated fields like science and mathematics. One participant, a teacher from Axim Girls SHS, explained, "The policy emphasises STEM education and the need for girls to venture into these areas. It encourages girls that they can do STEM courses and excel just like their male counterparts." This finding supports the work of Wang and Degol (2017), which highlights the critical role of targeted interventions in increasing female participation in STEM fields, thereby reducing gender gaps in career opportunities. This study also found that fewer boys are enrolling due to illegal gold mining (Galamsey) and the popularity of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET); the model should be expanded to include factors that drive boys to leave or attract them.

Reduction of Financial Barriers

The Free SHS policy has significantly reduced financial barriers that previously hindered girls' access to education. Respondents noted that the policy ensures free tuition and other benefits, which alleviate the financial burden on families and allow parents to send both sons and daughters to school. One participant, a student from Nsein SHS, remarked, "Education is now for everyone. Boys and girls have an equal chance to study." Furthermore, the policy's impact has been so profound that some respondents reported an increase in female enrolment relative to male enrolment. As one teacher from Nsein SHS stated, "In fact, now we enrol more girls than boys." This reflects findings from Evans and Popova (2016), who argue that eliminating financial barriers is a key driver in reducing gender disparities in education, especially in low-income contexts. The thematic analysis of the responses reveals that the Free SHS policy has made significant strides in promoting gender equity in education by increasing access, reducing financial barriers, fostering inclusivity, and

encouraging female participation in STEM fields. These findings underscore the transformative potential of free education policies in addressing historical gender imbalances and empowering female students to succeed academically. The analysis aligns with global research, such as that by UNESCO (2020) and Unterhalter (2013), which emphasises the importance of policy-driven interventions in achieving equitable educational outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Assessing the enrolment, retention, and completion rates of male and female students in selected SHS under the Free SHS policy

The study found that the introduction of the Free SHS policy has had a positive impact on the enrolment, retention, and completion rates of both male and female students. Female enrolment has increased, with a notable rise in the number of girls accessing education, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This supports findings from various studies highlighting how financial barriers to education have historically limited girls' access to secondary education, particularly in rural and low-income areas (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). However, although enrolment rates for female students have increased, there are concerns about persistent gender disparities in retention and completion rates. Female students, although enrolled at comparable rates to their male counterparts, continue to face challenges such as early marriage, pregnancy, and gender stereotypes that can hinder their academic progression. This observation aligns with the work of Tilahun (2013), who argues that gender-specific challenges, such as socio-cultural expectations and early pregnancies, disproportionately affect female students, ultimately influencing their retention and completion rates. The findings suggest that although Free SHS has enabled more girls to remain in school, additional support systems and policies that address specific barriers, such as early pregnancies and societal attitudes toward girls' education, are necessary to further improve retention and completion rates.

Identifying Gender-specific challenges faced by female students within the Free SHS framework in the Western Region

Female students under the Free SHS policy face several gender-specific challenges that impact their educational experience and overall academic performance. A significant issue identified in the study was the lack of access to sanitary products, with many girls unable to attend school during their menstruation due to discomfort or embarrassment. This finding supports the work of Oloo (2010), who notes that the absence of sanitary products is a critical barrier that negatively impacts girls' attendance, participation in school activities, and academic performance. Other challenges faced by female students include early pregnancies, gender-based violence, and limited access to career guidance in male-dominated fields such as engineering and technology. While the Free SHS policy has enabled more girls to access education, these socio-cultural barriers persist, limiting their opportunities for academic success and career progression. This is consistent with findings from Kainuwa and Yusuf (2013), which highlight how early pregnancies and societal norms still impede girls' educational journeys, even in environments where education is free. The study suggests that while Free SHS has contributed to female students' education, gender-specific interventions such as providing sanitary products, addressing teenage pregnancy, and offering targeted career counselling are crucial in supporting female students to overcome these barriers.

The perceptions and experiences of students, teachers, and administrators regarding the effectiveness of the Free SHS policy in achieving gender equity in education

The perceptions and experiences of students, teachers, and administrators indicate that the Free SHS policy has been effective in promoting gender equity in education, particularly by ensuring equal access for both male and female students. Many respondents emphasised that the policy has enabled girls from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend school and pursue higher education, which was previously unattainable for them due to financial constraints. However, while the policy has promoted gender equity in terms of access, there remains a gap in the experiences and aspirations of male and female students. Female students, although increasingly enrolled in secondary education, still face gender-specific challenges that hinder their full participation and achievement. Teachers and administrators acknowledged the need for continued gender-responsive policies that address these challenges, including targeted mentorship programmes, career counselling, and more inclusive curriculum development. The findings align with the work of Boateng (2024), who emphasises that while policy reforms like Free SHS can improve gender equity in education, true gender parity can only be achieved through complementary interventions that address the underlying socio-cultural barriers affecting female students' academic journeys. Empowering female students through mentorship, female role models in male-dominated fields, and addressing gender stereotypes are critical in ensuring that the Free SHS policy not only provides access to education but also supports the academic and career aspirations of female students. It is also worth considering alternative or complementary explanations for observed access gains: broader national and NGO-led social campaigns promoting girls' education, district-level community health programmes, changes in the computerised school placement system, and macroeconomic shifts affecting household income may all have contributed to increased female enrolment independently of Free SHS. Future research should attempt to disentangle these factors using longitudinal or comparative designs. Regarding transferability: while this study is grounded in two schools in one coastal district, the barriers and enabling conditions identified, economic pressures, socio-cultural norms, infrastructural deficits, and teacher sensitisation are consistent with patterns documented across rural Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa. Practitioners in similarly characterised districts may find the findings and recommendations cautiously applicable, with appropriate local adaptation.

Linking findings to the conceptual model, alternative explanations, and transferability

Our conceptual model (Figure 1) suggests the Free SHS policy impacts fairness between boys and girls in education in four ways: through how many girls sign up, how many stay in school, how many finish, the specific problems girls face, and what students, teachers, heads of schools, and parents think. The results of our research back up several of these ideas. Firstly, the increase in the number of people signing up is clearly supported; people in the study repeatedly said that more girls are enrolling because school fees were removed, and Table 1 shows a 66 to 95% increase in total enrolment after the policy began. Secondly, improvements in girls' school attendance and completion are partially supported. While girls are doing better in these areas (for example, at Axim Girls, 12 and 13 percentage points more girls are staying on and completing their courses), the fact that a gap between boys and girls still exists (only 81% of girls finished by 2022-2023) means something else is getting in the way. Thirdly, the idea that girls face difficulties is totally supported: things like managing periods, housework, getting pregnant young, and the costs of being poor are all important reasons why the policy is not helping girls stay in and finish school. And fourthly, what students, teachers, heads of schools, and parents think (and they were all asked) shows they are hopeful about getting into school but also annoyed by the remaining difficulties, and these views affect whether the policy is seen as legitimate. However, we did not find evidence for one part of the model: it suggested that more girls signing up would automatically lead to more finishing, but we found no immediate link. Instead, whether girls stay on and finish is linked to the quality of schools and the social and cultural norms in the area. Plus, the model does not consider what is happening with boys. We unexpectedly found that fewer boys are enrolling due to illegal gold mining (Galamsey) and the popularity of TVET; the model should be expanded to include factors that drive boys to leave or attract them.

While the Free SHS policy seems to be the main reason more girls are entering education, other factors occurring at the same time may also have played a part. For a start, a range of wider social movements - both national ones and those run by charities like “Girls’ Education Awareness Week” and UNICEF’s “Let Us Learn” - were happening in the Western Region during the study, and these could have changed how parents think about girls’ schooling regardless of Free SHS. Also, district-level projects, such as the “Nzema East Girls’ Empowerment Project” (running since 2019), provide mentoring and sanitary towels and could help explain some of the improvements in girls' retention, beyond simply removing fees. Then, the way students are allocated to schools changed in 2018 to be fairer to girls, which may have increased the number of girls in secondary school independently. Finally, financial difficulties, changes in how much fishermen are earning (fishing is the main job in the area), and the coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) pandemic, have different effects on how much money families have, which may have changed how well families can support their daughters’ education, regardless of school fees. Our research, based on in-depth interviews, can’t separate these influences, but future research that combines qualitative and quantitative methods should determine how much of the change is due to Free SHS and how much to these other factors.

This research was conducted at two schools specifically chosen for their characteristics: Axim Girls SHS (a girls-only school) and Nsein SHS (a mixed school), both in the rural coastal Nzema East District. These schools aren’t a perfect statistical representation of all Ghanaian secondary schools, but they provide valuable, comparable insights. Axim Girls SHS shows what happens when you have only girls, and makes it clear that even without boys around, cultural and practical problems with the school building itself persist. Nsein SHS allows us to examine differences between boys and girls in a school where they are taught together, and to see how many stay on and finish. People can cautiously apply what we’ve found to other coastal districts in Ghana (like Jomoro, Ellembelle, and Ahanta West), which are similar in being based around fishing, having a lot of teenage pregnancies (more than the national average), limited school buildings, and strong traditional views on what girls should do. It’s less likely that the findings will be useful in cities (like Accra or Kumasi) where schools are better and cultural views differ, or in the Northern areas of Ghana, where the difficulties for girls are more extreme (for instance, fewer girls start secondary school and more get married at a young age). People working in or making policies for districts like the one in this study can use these findings to create specific plans (providing period products, allowing girls to return to education if they become pregnant, and engaging with the community), but they need to adapt them to the area's specifics. In the future, research should test the applicability of the findings to other areas by conducting similar studies across different districts and environments.

CONCLUSION

This in-depth study of people's views at two schools in the Nzema East District examined how Ghana’s Free SHS policy affects fairness between boys and girls. The study was successful in what it set out to do by finding out what people think about the policy, and by showing both how it has been good at getting more kids into school, but also how social and practical problems, and the way things are built, are still stopping all students from being equally able to get an education. Three main points came from the detailed information gathered. First, more girls are getting to secondary school because of the end of school fees. Students and teachers were clear that without the financial help of the policy, many girls would have had to get married too young or become fish sellers because families have traditionally given boys' education first place. Second, even though more girls are starting school, they are still finding it hard to stay in education. People who took part said girls cannot go to school when they are having their period because they cannot afford sanitary products, and doing housework and selling in the market takes up so much time that they have much less opportunity to study. Plus, because of being desperate for money and because of what their friends are doing, girls are

still getting pregnant in their teens and being forced to leave school. Finally, because so many more students are attending school, schools are struggling with resource shortages, which are affecting the quality of education. Teachers and heads say classrooms are severely overcrowded, often with sixty students when forty should be enough, and dorms are too full and harmful to students' health and privacy. At the same time, people have noticed that boys are increasingly being drawn away from school by illegal gold mining ('Galamsey') and by learning a trade, leading to a decrease in the number of boys continuing their education.

These results show that simply removing school fees is not enough to make things fair for boys and girls. To turn more students being able to go to school into everyone having a fair chance to get an education, the information suggests a few important steps. The government needs to eliminate fees and invest specifically in schools designed to meet the needs of girls, with enough toilets and expanded dorms to safely accommodate the increased numbers. Schools and local councils should create useful help for students, with a large focus on supplying sanitary products and official programmes to allow girls who have become pregnant to return to school without being shamed. Importantly, the community needs to be informed to change long-held beliefs where girls' education is not valued, and to lessen the attraction of illegal gold mining for boys. These findings are grounded in the specific context of two schools in one district, and readers should exercise caution in generalising beyond comparable rural coastal settings in Ghana. That said, the patterns identified the gap between enrolment gains and equitable educational experience, particularly, are consistent with national and regional evidence, suggesting that the policy-design implications are broadly relevant. Policymakers should complement fee-abolition with targeted investments in gender-sensitive school infrastructure, menstrual hygiene support, re-entry programmes for girls affected by pregnancy, community sensitisation campaigns, and mentorship schemes.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE STUDIES

One primary limitation is its focus on a specific geographic area, the Nzema East District in the Western Region of Ghana, which may affect the generalizability of the results to other regions with different socioeconomic or cultural dynamics. While the findings will provide information on the impact of the Free SHS policy on gender equity within this context, they may not fully capture the experiences of students, teachers, and administrators in other parts of Ghana. Additionally, as a purely qualitative study, the research relies heavily on participants' subjective perspectives, which could introduce personal biases. Participants may have varying levels of openness about sensitive topics, especially regarding gender-specific challenges, and their responses could be influenced by social desirability or concerns about confidentiality, even with measures to ensure anonymity. Subsequent research should investigate the presence of analogous patterns in other districts, particularly in Northern Ghana, where gender-related challenges are generally more pronounced. Such research should also incorporate school administrative data to validate the qualitative findings delineated herein. An important question to investigate further is: Does where a student lives affect their chances of getting an education? How is the Free SHS policy making it easier for girls in rural Ghana to get the same chances as boys? Are students really staying in school and doing well in school because of the Free SHS programme? And lastly, is getting rid of tuition enough, or are health support and mentorship the real reasons girls stay in school?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improvement of Infrastructure to Address Gender-Specific Needs

To ensure that female students can learn in a conducive environment, the government and stakeholders should invest in improving school infrastructure. This includes providing adequate dormitory facilities, ensuring privacy, and equipping schools with sufficient sanitary facilities and menstrual hygiene products. These interventions would help mitigate the challenges faced by female students and promote their retention and academic performance.

Strengthening Support Systems for Retention and Completion

Specialised support systems should be developed to address barriers such as teenage pregnancies and early marriages. Schools can establish robust re-entry programmes to ensure that girls who drop out due to pregnancy or other challenges are fully reintegrated into the educational system. Additionally, community-based advocacy campaigns should be conducted to sensitise parents and community members about the importance of supporting girls' education.

Monitoring and Evaluation for Gender Equity

The government and policymakers should establish a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the gender-specific impact of the Free SHS policy. This framework should include indicators such as enrolment, retention, completion rates, and post-secondary career outcomes for female students. Data-driven insights will help refine the policy and address emerging challenges effectively.

Collaboration with Development Partners and NGOs

The government should collaborate with development partners and non-governmental organisations to mobilise resources and expertise for gender-focused interventions. These partnerships can support initiatives such as empowerment workshops, scholarships, and infrastructure improvement projects.

Declarations

Funding: This study received no funding.

Acknowledgement: Researchers thank the Department of Education for allowing this study to take place in their schools and all participants in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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