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Factors influencing Ghana's gender gaps in school attendance: A cross-sectional study using data from Ghana Living Standards Surveys

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Abstract

This study uses data from recent waves of the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS) to examine the nature and extent of gender gaps in school attendance, and to explore the underlying factors influencing the gender gaps. In pursuit of this, graphical analysis and probit regressions are employed. Focusing on persons aged between 6 and 21 years, the findings support the view that a gender gap (favouring boys) in school attendance exists for those aged 15 years and above. The paper also highlights the important role of parental education in influencing school attendance. The study further suggests that Ghana's gender gap in school attendance is driven by societal norms about the relative importance of girls' schooling versus that of boys, as well as various challenges girls face in post-puberty years. This study's findings have considerable policy relevance for education within the Ghanaian context.

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Introduction

For several decades, the empowerment of women has featured prominently in both public discussions and academic discourse. This is informed by the realization that the benefits of women's empowerment transcend the wellbeing of women, since the resultant positive externalities are enjoyed by children and men as well. Indeed, one of the most powerful acknowledgements of the pivotal role of women's empowerment in enhancing wellbeing has been provided by the United Nations. In two successive global declarations – the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN has endorsed the critical importance of educational attainment, the promotion of gender equality, and the empowerment of women, among others. In developing countries, however, the educational attainment of females is typically lower than that of males. In acknowledging the crucial importance of bridging the gender schooling gap, this study examines an issue pertinent to the attainment of women's empowerment in developing countries.

While schooling has been widely acknowledged to be central to the enhancement of wellbeing in general, the education of females has often been touted as being particularly important for promoting the welfare of women and children. Developing countries are, however, typically faced with education-related gender disparities that adversely affect women's labour market participation and outcomes, not to mention other unfavourable outcomes for females, such as challenges with asset accumulation, low participation in political processes, and a general lack of empowerment. These schooling gender gaps include disparities in enrolment, attendance, grade progression, and school dropout. Significantly, several studies have found education gender gaps with respect to enrolment or access, completion rates, educational attainment, schooling output, and returns to schooling (Psaki et al., 2018; Muralidharan & Sheth, 2016).

Although various studies have highlighted gender gaps in education (e.g., Blunch & Das, 2015, Bertocchi & Bozzano, 2020; Evans et al., 2020), there is more to be learnt, especially regarding an understanding of the factors underlying these gaps. In a study to investigate the effect of low-cost private schooling on the gender schooling gap, Bizenjo (2020) employed data from Pakistan and rigorous quantitative techniques to study the intensity with which low-cost private schools (LCPSs) contribute towards reducing the gender gap in schooling. The study found that in comparison with girls, boys are more likely to attend low-cost private schools, and that, this further increases the gender schooling gap in Pakistan. Baten et al. (2021) have also employed census data and a cohort framework to investigate education gender gaps over the course of the twentieth century. They found that although Africa had a small initial schooling gender gap, the region later made the least progress in reducing the gap.

The literature on the economics of education abounds with various explanations for the observed schooling gender gaps in developing countries. One school of thought attributes these education gender gaps to socio-cultural norms that prescribe a dominant

role for females in household activities and a breadwinner role for men (Dessy et al., 2023). In many developing countries, the household is structured on the premise that the primary responsibility for generating income for the household lies with the household head, who is typically a man. Thus, the task of working on the farm or providing labour market services (in return for wages) falls mainly on the men. Women are expected to provide care for babies and little children, cook for the household, and carry out other household chores, such as the fetching of water, washing, and cleaning. This role of women in many developing countries seems to have evolved as an extension of their biological role of giving birth and nursing babies. Thus, parents in many less developed countries tend to exhibit a preference for sons' education over that of girls. This explanation for the existence of schooling gender gaps in low-income countries sees the above societal norms as signalling that girls do not need as much formal education as boys. While this phenomenon may be described as parental discrimination against daughters, it could also reflect parents' economic assessment – even if inaccurately done – of the costs and benefits of girls' education vis-à-vis that of boys.

Another major explanation of the schooling gender gap in developing countries is the role of parental evaluation of the returns to their investments in the schooling of sons vis-à-vis that of daughters. This can be influenced by gender differences in the opportunity costs of schooling and gender discrimination in the labour market. Other considerations by parents include differences in the direct costs of schooling, and gender differences in the risks of non-completion of schooling. Although various studies suggest that the labour market returns to schooling is generally higher for females, relative to males (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018; Asravor, 2021), anecdotal evidence suggests that many parents in developing countries have a contrary view. This can easily arise from the nuanced nature of parental investments in children's education. For example, the intrahousehold distribution of schooling investment can be influenced by the number, ages, sex composition, and even birth order of the children, as well as parents' expectations of future financial support from their children (Hedges et al., 2019; Chen, 2020). It should be noted also that a cost-benefit analysis that fails to adequately account for the external benefits of females' education might lead to females' education yielding a lower rate of labour market returns than males' education.

The third main explanation for the boys-favouring schooling gender gap in developing countries is the relatively low labour-market earnings of females. In Africa, the gender earnings gap is often a reflection of factors such as gender differences in household responsibilities, as well as societal norms and cultural values. Clearly, in a situation where women's labour-market earnings considerably fall short of men's earnings, the incentive for parents (and females) to invest money and time in girls' education wanes. This disincentive for the advancement of females' education, especially beyond a certain threshold (often influenced by that level's direct and opportunity costs) cannot be ignored.

This brief survey of some of the proposed explanations for education gender gaps in developing countries highlights the nuanced and interconnected nature of the factors. It should be emphasized that deep-rooted sociocultural norms are reckoned to be dominant factors accounting for the gaps. For the West African country of Ghana, efforts have been made over the past few decades to boost girls' education in anticipation of addressing the gender schooling gaps. This study focuses on two main issues, namely, the nature and extent of gender gaps in school attendance in Ghana, and an examination of the factors underpinning gender disparities in school attendance. Thus, the study attempts to provide answers to the following research questions: 1) What is the nature and extent of gender gaps in school attendance in Ghana? 2) What are the underlying factors influencing the identified gender gaps in school attendance? To this end, the study uses data from three rounds (the 2005/2006, 2012/2013, and 2016/2017 waves) of the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS). Data from all three surveys are used to profile the nature and extent of gender disparities in schooling, while the 2016/2017 GLSS dataset is used to examine factors underlying gender gaps in school attendance.

Methods

Research design and setting

It would be recalled that the first research question for this study focuses on the examination of the nature and extent of gender gaps in school attendance. In doing this, the study uses graphs to compare gross school attendance rates, disaggregated by gender, for each age cohort in the age range 6 – 23 years. This descriptive exercise is important in providing useful information for the econometric analysis that follows when dealing with the second research question.

The second research question looks at factors influencing gender gaps in school attendance in Ghana. Theoretically, one can view a person's school attendance as a decision made based on a comparison between the benefits and costs of attending school. A key point to note though, is that in the case of school attendance, especially for primary and secondary schooling, the decision is made by the child's parents or guardian, the child, or both parties, depending on the age of the child. However, in examining the determinants of school attendance, we can proceed without knowing who the decision maker is, so long as factors influencing the decision are adequately captured. Thus, the research proceeds by employing a model of school attendance that assumes that a child will attend school so long as the benefits of school attendance outweigh the costs.

Let: B_i denote the benefits of the ith individual's school attendance; and
C_i denote the costs of the ith individual's school attendance.

Then, $A_i = B_i - C_i$ represents the net benefits of the ith individual's school attendance.

Notably, B and C are functions of the individual's characteristics, the household's characteristics, and the characteristics of the community.

Thus, A is also a function of the characteristics of the individual, the household, and the community.

Thus, $A_i = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta X_i} + \varepsilon_i$

Where:

$\boldsymbol{X}$ is a set of variables that affect the costs or benefits of school attendance

$\boldsymbol{\beta}$ is a vector of coefficients

β_0 is a constant term; and

ε_i is a stochastic error term

The individual will attend school if $B - C > 0$, that is, if $A > 0$; and

The individual will not attend school if $B - C \leq 0$, that is, if $A \leq 0$.

Since we do not observe *B* and *C,* we do not observe *A*. We are, however, able to determine whether

$A > 0$ or $A \leq 0$ by observing the individual's school attendance status.

Let *D* be a binary variable defined by:

$D = 1$ if an individual is observed to attend school, implying $A > 0$; and

$D = 0$ if an individual does not attend school, implying $A \leq 0$.

Thus, $D = 1$ if $\beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta X_i} + \varepsilon_i > 0$; and

$D = 0$ if $\beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta X_i} + \varepsilon_i \leq 0$

If we assume that εi has a standard normal distribution, it can be shown that for a binary dependent variable D, the model of school attendance is consistent with a probit model (see Stock & Watson, 2019).

The probability that an individual attends school can, therefore, be defined as follows:

$$P(D=1 \mid X) = F(\beta 0 + \beta 1X1 + \ldots + \beta kXk) = F(\beta 0 + \beta X)$$

Where:

$\boldsymbol{X} = (X_1, \ldots, X_k)$ represents a set of regressors or variables which influence the probability that an individual will attend school.

$\boldsymbol{\beta} = (\beta_1, \ldots, \beta_k)$ is a vector of the respective coefficients of the regressors.

β_0 is a constant term; and

F is the standard normal cumulative distribution function (cdf), a function whose values

lie strictly between 0 and 1.

Data for the study

The study uses secondary data from three waves of the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS). The Ghana Living Standards Surveys are nationally representative surveys that cover various topics of relevance to livelihoods. The first GLSS (that is, GLSS1) was carried out in 1987/1988, and the 2016/2017 survey (GLSS7) is the most recent. The GLSS datasets contain information on numerous themes, including household demographic characteristics, education, health, employment, migration, household finances, and consumption expenditure. The study uses data from the 2005/2006, 2012/2013, and 2016/2017 Ghana Living Standards Surveys for the graphical analysis, while the econometric analysis is based on data from the 2016/2017 survey.

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis

The purpose of this sub-section is to present graphical descriptive statistics on school attendance rates over time. We do this by first, generating statistics on school attendance rates for the cohort of children aged 6-12 years at the time of the 2005/2006 Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS). We would normally be interested in computing the school attendance rates of these children over time. However, the various waves of the GLSS are cross sectional in nature. Thus, we are unable to determine the school attendance rates of these children over time. We therefore resort to calculating the attendance rates for a pseudo-cohort of individuals whose ages (in years) were in the range 6-12 during the 2005/2006 survey. These attendance rates have been computed for the periods 2005/2006, 2012/2013, and 2016/2017. The rates, which have also been disaggregated by sex, are shown in Figure 1 below. It should be noted that during the 2012/2013 and 2016/2017 surveys, the cohort of 6-12-year-old children were in the age ranges 13-19 and 17-23 respectively. Thus, they were represented by individuals in the respective age groups.

Econometric analysis

The dependent variable for the probit regression is a binary variable that indicates whether the individual is in school. And here, the individual is said to be in school if they attended school during the twelve months preceding the survey and are still in school. Thus, this binary dependent variable is assigned a value of 1 if the individual is in school, and a value of zero if not. The covariates for the probit regression include sex, age group, urban-rural status, father's educational attainment, mother's educational attainment, and administrative region of residence. It is worth noting that owing to the focus of the study, the econometric analysis is restricted to persons in the age group 6-21 years.

Given that gender disparity is a major focus of this study, we include in the regression a variable representing the individual's sex. This method, with the inclusion of appropriate interaction terms, is preferred to estimating separate regressions for males and females. This is because separate regressions make it more difficult to estimate and test for gender differences in school attendance. The inclusion of gender dummies in the regression is to enable us to examine the extent to which a person's sex influences their probability of attending school. The probit regression therefore includes a variable that takes the value 1 if a person is female and zero if the person is a male.

The inclusion of a variable for age group is a recognition of the fact that school attendance is likely to differ among different age cohorts. In general, it is expected that owing to schooling attrition, younger age cohorts will have better school attendance than older ones. In view of the likely importance of parental education in influencing school attendance, the covariates of the probit regression include dummy variables for various categories of parent's (father's and mother's) educational attainment. To control

the effects of location on school attendance, the covariates for the probit regression also include dummy variables for urban, rural, and administrative region of residence.

It is important to note that the choice of regressors for the regression considerably reduces the chances of endogeneity becoming an issue. This is because although each of the regressors or covariates can influence school attendance, it is improbable that school attendance will influence these regressors. The regression estimation additionally makes an adjustment for clustering of individuals within households by employing the generalized Huber-White sandwich estimator to compute the VCE, that is the estimated variance-covariance matrix of the parameters.

It should be further noted that since all the covariates in the regression are categorical, it is more useful to show the frequencies and corresponding percentages of the key regressors rather than their summary statistics. These frequencies are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Relevant descriptive statistics (N= 11.834)

Demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	5,987	50.59
Female	5,847	49.41
Age group		
6-11	4,993	42.19
12-14	2,339	19.77
15-17	2,177	18.40
18-21	2,325	19.65
Urban-rural status		
Urban	5,400	45.63
Rural	6,434	54.37
Father's educational qualification		
None or KG	2,334	19.72
Primary or JHS/Middle	6,950	58.73
Secondary or higher	2,550	21.55
Mother's educational qualification		
None or KG	2,539	21.46
Primary or JHS/Middle	8,086	68.33
Secondary or higher	1,209	10.22

Source: Author's computation, using 2016/2017 GLSS data.

Results

Results of the descriptive analysis

The results of the descriptive analysis are shown in Figure 1 below.

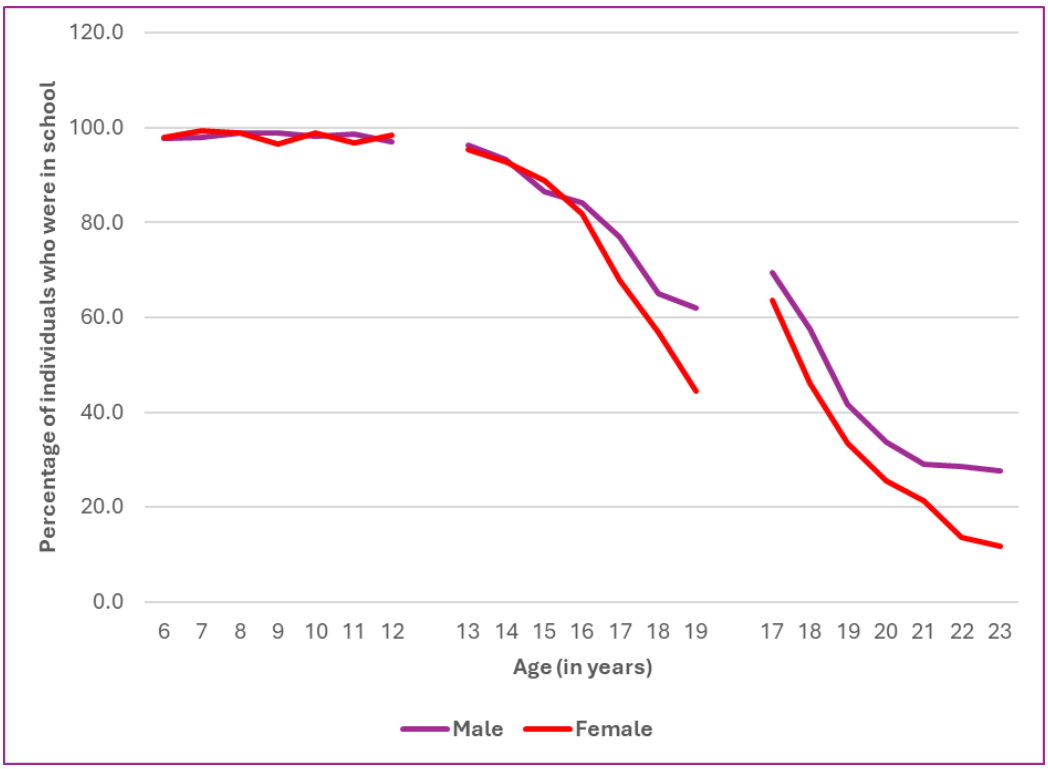

Figure 1: School attendance rates for a pseudo-cohort of individuals over time

Results of the econometric analysis

The results of the probit regressions are shown in Table 2 below. Two probit regression models are presented. The difference between the two models is the inclusion of region of residence in model 2. To the extent that model 2 controls (justifiably) for the region of residence of the individuals in the sample, the study's preferred probit regression is model 2. Apart from showing the probit coefficients for the two models, Table 2 also displays the marginal effects of the respective sets of covariates. The total number of individuals captured in the regression analysis is 11,834.

Table 2: Probit regression results

Demographic characteristics	Model 1	Marginal Eff.	Model 2	Marginal Eff.
Gender				
Male (Reference category)				
Female	-0.122** (0.060)	-0.025*** (0.006)	-0.123** (0.061)	-0.024*** (0.006)
Age group				
6-11	0.085*** (0.072)	0.193*** (0.009)	1.089*** (0.072)	0.193*** (0.009)
12-14	0.860*** (0.076)	0.174*** (0.010)	0.875*** (0.076)	0.175*** (0.010)
15-17 (Reference category)				
18-21	-0.957*** (0.056)	-0.382*** (0.013)	-0.958*** (0.057)	-0.379*** (0.013)
Urban-rural status				
Urban (Reference category)				
Rural	0.046 (0.038)	0.008 (0.006)	-0.023 (0.040)	-0.004 (0.007)
Father's educational qualification				
None or KG (Reference category)				
Primary or JHS/Middle	0.142*** (0.053)	0.025*** (0.009)	0.213*** (0.055)	0.037*** (0.010)
Secondary or higher	0.249*** (0.066)	0.042*** (0.011)	0.311*** (0.067)	0.053*** (0.012)
Mother's educational qualification				
None or KG (Reference category)				
Primary or JHS/Middle	0.111** (0.051)	0.019** (0.009)	0.154*** (0.053)	0.026*** (0.009)
Secondary or higher	0.321*** (0.091)	0.052*** (0.014)	0.370*** (0.090)	0.060*** (0.014)
Female – age group interaction				
Male # 6-11 (Reference) Male # 12-14 (Reference) Male # 15-17 (Reference) Male # 18-21 (Reference)				
Female # 6-11	0.291***(0.101)		0.296***(0.103)	
Female # 12-14	0.187*(0.111)		0.190* (0.112)	
Female # 15-17 (Reference)				
Female # 18-21	-0.183**(0.079)		-0.186** (0.080)	
Region of residence				
Western (Reference)				
Central			0.045 (0.076)	0.008 (0.013)
Greater Accra			-0.108 (0.082)	-0.020 (0.015)
Volta			0.177** (0.078)	0.030** (0.013)
Eastern			0.021 (0.013)	0.125 (0.078)
Ashanti			0.022* (0.013)	0.131* (0.074)
Brong Ahafo			0.030** (0.014)	0.177** (0.081)
Northern			0.028*(0.017)	0.168*(0.101)
Upper East			0.056***(0.014)	0.349***(0.087)
Upper West			0.072***(0.015)	0.461***(0.102)
Constant	0.586***(0.063)		0.407***(0.090)	
R^2	0.356	0.356	0.362	0.362
N	11,834	11,834	11,834	11,834

Note:
Standard errors in parentheses
* p <.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

Discussion of results

Discussion of results of the descriptive analysis

We see from Figure 1 that there is very little difference in school attendance rates between boys and girls aged 6-12 years. Furthermore, school attendance rates for this age group are very high, ranging from 96.6 percent (for 9-year-old girls) to 99.4 percent (for 7-year-old girls). While some of the children in this age group are likely to be in Junior High School (JHS), most of the children in the cohort are expected to be in primary school. The high school attendance rates for these 6-12-year-old children can be attributed to the increased appreciation – among Ghanaian parents – of the importance of basic education for both boys and girls. This increased appreciation may be attributed partly to the FCUBE (Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education) policy initiated in the country in 1995. This policy, despite its various challenges, has contributed to ensuring that most children have, at least, some primary education.

As shown in Figure 1, two major changes in school attendance rate are observed for individuals in the age group 13-19. We notice an overall drop in the rates for both boys and girls. However, girls experience a much bigger fall in attendance rates than boys, leading to a gender gap in school attendance rates, starting from the time individuals reach their mid-teens. Figure 1 further shows that the gender gap in school attendance rates increases over the age range 16-19. It is plausible that the overall reduction in school attendance rates for the 13-19-year-olds is partly due to the general increase in cost of education at their level of schooling. It is expected that most 13-19-year-olds would be in Junior High School (JHS) or Senior High School (SHS), where the direct cost of schooling is generally higher, compared to the cost of primary education. Other factors, such as early marriage and teenage pregnancy, plausibly account for this pattern of school attendance rates between boys and girls.

For persons in the age range 17-23 years, the school attendance rate generally fell, with the gender gap in attendance rates widening over the age range 19-23 years. This, together with the pattern of attendance rates for the 13–19-year-old phase, generally suggests that the gender gap in school attendance rates does not fall once individuals reach their mid-teens. This pattern is again consistent with the Ghanaian society's common perception that the average man requires a higher level of education than the average woman.

Discussion of results of the econometric analysis

From the results of model 2 (the preferred model), gender plays a crucial role in school attendance. All things being equal, females are less likely (than males) to attend school. The marginal effects show that being female reduces the probability of a person attending school by 0.024 or 2.4 percentage points. This finding is generally consistent with a priori expectations. It underscores the widely held view that girls' schooling in Ghana, notably beyond the primary or Junior High School (JHS) level, is often lower than that of boys. This finding is consistent with Alhassan & Odame (2015) and Wolf et al. (2016) who found evidence of gender educational disparity in Ghana.

An examination of the effect of age group on school attendance is insightful. The probit regression estimates (that is, model 2) show that compared to children aged 15-17 years, children in the 6-11 age cohort have a higher school attendance. On average, the probability of a child aged 6-11 years being in school is 19.3 percentage points higher than that of a child aged 15-17 years. Similarly, a child in the 12-14 age cohort has a higher (by 17.5 percentage points) probability of being in school than a person in the reference cohort (that is, the 15-17 age group). For persons in the 18-21 age range, however, the probability of attending school is lower than that of persons aged 15-17 years, with the difference in probability being 37.9 percentage points.

It is interesting to observe that the regression results highlight the importance of parental education in influencing school attendance. In comparison with a person whose father has no formal education (or is educated up to the kindergarten level), a person whose father has primary or JHS schooling is more likely to attend school, and the difference in probability is 3.7 percentage points. A similar analysis for the effect of mother's schooling yields similar results, with the difference in probability being 2.6 percentage points. Our regression estimates also indicate that parental attainment of secondary schooling or higher has even greater effects on the chances of a person attending school. In the case of a person whose father has secondary education or higher, the probability of that person attending school is 5.3 percentage points higher than that of a person whose father has no (or only kindergarten) schooling. The corresponding effect of a mother's education is similar, but with an even larger effect (an increase of 6.0 percentage points) on the probability of a person attending school. The findings on the effect of parental education on school attendance align with the expectation that the more educated a parent is, the more likely it is that they will be willing (and able) to support the schooling of the child.

On the role of urban-rural status of the individuals, the only point of note is the lack of statistical significance of the coefficients. While this result may seem surprising, it is plausibly a reflection of the fact that the dependent variable only captures school attendance status, and not quality of schooling. We note also, that to the extent that the variables on region were included mainly to control region-specific factors, no further comment on their coefficients is necessary.

In view of the important role of gender and age in influencing school attendance, the probit regression was also used to explore the plausible contribution of girls' fertility issues to the gender gap in school attendance. This was done by including interaction dummy variables for gender and age group in the regression. The results show that in comparison with the reference group (girls aged 15-17 years), girls in the age group 6-11, as well as those in the age group 12-14, have a higher probability of attending school. However, as expected, females aged 18-21 years have a lower probability of attending school than females aged 15-17 years. While these results are consistent with the narrative underlying Figure 1, further quantitative research will be helpful in providing additional

insights into the extent to which sexuality and fertility contribute to Ghana's gender gap in education.

The findings from the econometric analysis, coupled with the gender-disaggregated patterns of school attendance (Figure 1), provide strong evidence in support of a gender gap in school attendance beyond the Junior High School (JHS) level. This is because the gender gap in school attendance is pronounced for persons aged 15 years and above, and 15 years is roughly the age at which JHS is completed. It is useful to note that anecdotal evidence and findings from some qualitative studies provide useful information that buttress the findings of the present study (see, for example, Kumi-Yeboah 2015). Thus, various factors can be given as possible explanations for the emergence of the gender gap in school attendance around age 15.

For example, lower female school attendance, relative to that of males, has been linked to early marriage (especially in the rural areas) and pregnancy-related attrition in schooling (see Alhassan & Odame, 2015 and Morgan et al., 2022). The risk of girls becoming pregnant while in school may also discourage some parents from financing the schooling of their daughters beyond the SHS level. It has also been suggested that many girls often miss school because of menstrual health issues (see Mohammed et al., 2020). Clearly, girls who skip school for a few days monthly are likely to suffer some adverse effects on their academic performance, and this can contribute to their making the JHS level their terminal stage. The vulnerability of teenage girls to sexual abuse is also a factor that can contribute to the kind of schooling gender gap found in this study (see Kumi-Yeboah 2015 and Evans et al., 2023).

It should also be noted that although an entrance examination (the BECE[1]) and the much higher financial cost of Senior High School (SHS)[2] education pose a non-seamless transition from JHS to SHS, the constraints associated with the progression of girls are reckoned to be more formidable than what boys grapple with. For example, the financial cost of a teenage girl's schooling is higher than that of a teenage boy. Moreover, the cultural expectation of the man as the family's breadwinner often means that in situations where a choice must be made between a boy and a girl – in the context of financing of SHS education – the boy often gets the nod. Related to the societal norm that the woman is the manager of domestic chores, such as caring for young children, cooking, washing, and cleaning, many hold the view that a high level of schooling is not vital to a girl's future success as an adult. As a result, schooling beyond the JHS level can easily be regarded as unnecessary by parents grappling with financial challenges. Finally, in Ghana, girls often bear a heavier burden of domestic chores than boys, potentially making them less prepared for the BECE. This has the potential of making them miss out on secondary education.

Limitations of the study

The discussion of this study's results would be incomplete without acknowledging a couple of limitations. These drawbacks are all data related. First, owing to the cross-sectional nature of the dataset, it is impossible to accurately track the school attendance of individuals over time. Despite this weakness, the descriptive cohort analysis provides a useful way of gaining insight into the gender dimension of children's schooling progression. The second limitation is the lack of in-depth qualitative insight into the gender gap in school attendance. While this falls outside the purview of the study, the references to relevant qualitative findings of other studies have been helpful.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to answer two main questions: 1) What is the nature and extent of gender gaps in school attendance in Ghana? and 2) What are the underlying factors influencing the identified schooling gender gaps? The findings showed that a gender gap exists in school attendance among school going adolescents. In the context of persons aged between 6 and 21 years (the focus of the econometric analysis), the gender gap in school attendance is pronounced for persons aged 15 years and above. The study's findings also highlight the important role played by parental education in influencing school attendance. While both fathers' education and mothers' education have favourable effects on school attendance, mothers' attainment of secondary education or higher seems to have a larger effect than fathers' attainment of similar educational levels. The findings of the study further suggest that Ghana's gender gap in school attendance is driven by societal norms about the relative importance of girls' schooling versus that of boys, as well as various challenges girls face in their post-puberty years. It is worth noting that although some of the study's findings could have been anticipated given what we know from qualitative research, the quantitative results provide useful additional details and a very helpful validation of previous findings.

This study's findings have considerable policy relevance for education and gender in Ghana and in other developing countries. The findings have implications for policy issues on investment in education. In the specific case of Ghana, the findings provide support for the relevance of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy. In view of the finding of a fall in school attendance – especially for girls – from the age at which JHS (Junior High School) is often completed, it is important for Ghana to harness resources to sustain the country's free SHS policy. It would also be helpful for relevant stakeholders in Ghana and the developing world to continue with efforts at highlighting the importance of girls' education and of education in general.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Endnotes

1 This is the Basic Education Certificate Examination organised by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC).

2 Since 2017, a Free Senior High School (FSHS) has been in place, starting with students who started SHS that year.