

**3ie-IFPRI Joint Seminar: Financial Constraints and Girls' Secondary Education: Evidence from
School Fee Elimination in The Gambia
10/22/2015**

[Moussa Blimpo](#), an Economist at the World Bank's Africa Region and Development Policy Department, presented the paper "[Financial Constraints and Girls Post-Primary Education: Evidence from a School Fee Elimination Program in The Gambia](#)," – which he co-authored with Ousman Gajigo and Todd Pugatch – at the [3ie-IFPRI joint seminar series](#) in Washington, DC on October 22, 2015. Using nationally representative data of 12th Grade standardized Math and English test scores in The Gambia and data from the Gambian Integrated Household Survey, the authors evaluate the impact of a nationwide secondary school tuition waiver program for public school girls on enrollment and learning outcomes. Their results challenge the common notion that high enrollment numbers negatively affect the quality of education.

The researchers exploit the program's gradual rollout among the country's six regions to employ a difference-in-differences estimate of the program's impact. They assume that the Gambia's six regions experienced similar trends in enrollment and school achievement prior to the program's implementation, allowing the researchers to isolate the program's impact by measuring regional differences in the outcome indicators as the program was implemented.

Overall, they find large positive schooling effects, both from enrollment and test scores, from this intervention. Blimpo acknowledges the "black box" nature of the evaluation and the ambiguous theoretical case for their research hypotheses. He offered a few speculative explanations for their results but recognizes a lack of evidence to support a causal relationship. This is a concern that also drew comments and questions from the seminar participants.

Specifically, Blimpo and his colleagues' findings challenge the frequently alleged quantity-quality tradeoff in education. They find that eliminating secondary school fees for girls leads to a 55% increase in the number of girls who take the Grade 12 exit exam ($p < 0.05$) - reflecting a rise in enrollment, - as well as a 9% increase in girls' test scores ($p < 0.10$). Blimpo maintains that the absence of any negative effects of the program on test scores questions the belief that there is a tradeoff between school enrollment numbers and learning outcomes.

Moreover, the study identifies positive spillover effects on boys who live in households with girls benefiting from the program. Surprisingly, the researchers observe a 9% increase in boys' enrollment ($p < 0.05$) and an 11% increase in test scores ($p < 0.05$). Though, again, the theoretical explanation for these spillover effects remains unclear.

[Justin Sandefur](#), Research Fellow at the Center for Global Development, served as the discussant for the seminar. Sandefur's main concern regards the proposed spillover effects on boys' learning outcomes, maintaining that the effect appears too large to be credible, particularly since the program did not appear to impact the gender composition of secondary school enrollment. He questions the critical assumption that regional pre-treatment enrollment trends were not significantly different, suggesting that perhaps the two poorest and most remote regions (where the project was implemented first) were already experiencing faster than average enrollment rates.