

# Gender and Education in Niger: Access and Retention of Women in Higher Education Institutions

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Understanding the context of the access to and retention of female students in higher education in Niger requires a brief overview of the percentages of women in regards to literacy, employment and higher education in the country. As a result, the national literacy rate represented 20% in 2003 of whom 90.4% were men and less than 10% were women despite women representing 51% of the total country population (INS, 2005). In 2005, this rate became 28.7% According to the Ministry of Education (MEN), 76,368 trainees of whom 53,503 females were registered for the literacy training program in the academic year 2006-7. This shows that more than half of the literacy trainees were women. Likewise, it also implies that women constitute the least educated group, reason that pushed them to register at a higher rate than men in the literacy programs.

On a different note, women are underrepresented in higher administrative jobs in both the public and the private sectors. The University Abdou Moumouni of Niamey (known in French as *Université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey* - UAM), for example, had 304 faculty members in the academic year 2007-2008 of whom only 31 were women (10.19%). Even worse, The Islamic University (*Université Islamique de Say* – UIS - which is located in Say, a small town 50 kms south-west of Niamey) comprises 52 faculty members in same year and 58 in 2008-2009 with no single woman among them. In addition, in 2008 women constituted 33% of employees in the public sector and 13% in the private sector. In 2007, female employees represented 20% of the highest paying jobs in the public sector. With the same diploma and number of years of experience as their male counterparts, they would, however, receive a salary equal to that of men.

Until 2010, two public universities exist in Niger mainly UAM of Niamey, the country capitol and UIS in Say. In both universities, female students are far less than men: 10.5% in 2000, 17% in 2007 and 20.4% in 2008 in UAM and respectively 7%, 18% and 10.05% at UIS. It is worth mentioning that while UAM is a state-owned institution of higher learning, UIS is an internationally-owned university with students from all over the world especially Islamic countries. It was created by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1986. Only 334 out of 1091 UIS students were from Niger in 2008. Among these 334 students 96 were women exclusively studying in the faculty of Islamic studies and Arabic language, an all-girls school.

There is no female faculty in the teacher education school, the Faculty of Sharia and Islamic Law and the Faculty of the Arabic language and Literature, the last two faculties being all-boy schools.

With 9950 students concentrated at UAM in Niamey, of whom 9681 nationals included 1944 female students, the transitional government of General Djibo decided to transform the only three institutes of higher learning in the country into public universities in 2010 in Tahoua, Maradi and Zinder. The three new universities became operational at the start of the academic year 2011-2012. Therefore, statistics on their individual current student population are not yet available. However, as institutes in 2008, their total population existed as follows: Tahoua: 31 students of whom 11 were girls, Maradi: 31 students including three girls and Zinder: 27 students of whom nine were girls. If the trend continues, the underrepresentation of women in these institutes of higher learning would be obvious especially in that of Maradi which was a science and technology school where we have only three women out of 31 students. In addition, the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of private and semi-private higher education institutes: ISP (health), IPSP (health), IAT (technology), ENAM (administration, finance and law), ESCAE (administration, business and finance), Université Canadienne (Canadian University), Ecole des Cadres (administration), etc. These schools have a female student population of 40%.

This percentage of 40% hints at women's access to higher education institutions in that it indicates that they are more inclined to frown upon or even drop out of public institutions that require more years of study than the private institutes and to "cooling out", i.e., registering for diplomas guaranteeing less paying positions than men. What has been mentioned so far regarding women's presence in education in general and in higher education in particular, coupled with their feeble representation in public and private jobs points directly to the importance of this study on gender in higher education in Niger. Studying the access to and retention of women in higher education institutions will help us understand the reason(s) behind the underrepresentation of women in these institutions and those behind women's higher susceptibility to drop-out or select studies guaranteeing less paying jobs than men.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

- **General Question**

What explains the limitation of access and retention of women in higher education?

- **Detailed sub-questions**

- a) In what way do socio-cultural and economic factors (i.e. stereotypes, parents' illiteracy/levels of schooling, especially mothers, economic and socio-cultural factors, etc.) hinder access of women in higher education?
- b) In what way do the institutional factors (higher education policy, goals and objectives of higher education, programs, budget allocations, campus housing, affirmative action, anti- harassment and other gender equality laws, etc.) favor or support the retention of women in higher education?

- c) To what extent does the newly adopted Bachelors-Masters-Doctorate, known in French as *Licence- Masters - Doctorat (LMD)*, system contribute to better access and retention of women in higher education?

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

#### **General Objectives**

- Contribute to the promotion of equitable access of women in higher education;
- Contribute to improving retention of women in higher education.

#### **Specific Objectives**

- Analyze the indicators of different levels of schooling (elementary, secondary and postsecondary): Rate of success in BAC, rate of access and retention, rate of success in end of year and end of semester finals over the last ten (10) years;
- Identify the factors that hinder the access and the retention of women in higher education (socio-cultural, economic, political factors and stereotypes);
- Make recommendations for a better application of results of this study in particular in higher education policy making.

**1.4 Study Hypothesis:** The institutional factors, i.e., Higher education policy (strategic planning, budget, program of studies, school and course time, job opportunity, etc.) determine women's access to and retention in higher education in Niger.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Country Context: Current State of Higher Education in Niger**

- **University Abdou Moumouni**

The number of female students in Niger higher education is very much below average. From 2000 to 2005, i.e., for five years, the percentage at UAM of Niamey, which is the main public institution, remained no higher than 21-22%. Between 2001 and 2003, it even regressed to 17% only to return to 20% by 2005. Table 1 below illustrates the lingering evolution of the female student population at UAM from 2000 to 2005. Table 2 also exemplifies that, although a little higher than it was at UAM, this rate was only 40% in private higher education institutions while in vocational public, semi-public and private institutions it ranged from 35 to 40% (Table 3 below). These (semi-) private institutions and the vocational institutions have a higher percentage of women due to their short term study program (two years maximum for the majority of them) and the likelihood for them to earn a job, albeit low paying, right after finishing.

**Table 1: Evolution of number of students at University Abdou Moumouni (UAM) 2001 to 2005 (Scolarité Centrale, 2005)**

| Year                        | 2001-2002 |      |      | 2002-2003 |      |      | 2003-2004 |      |      | 2004-2005 |      |      | 2005-2006 |      |      |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------|------|-----------|------|------|-----------|------|------|-----------|------|------|-----------|------|------|
|                             | M         | F    | % F  | M         | F    | % F  | M         | F    | % F  | M         | F    | %F   | M         | F    | %F   |
| F.S (science)               | 877       | 66   | 7    | 625       | 51   | 7,5  | 503       | 58   | 20,3 | 564       | 55   | 8,8  | 660       | 63   | 8,7  |
| FSS (medicine)              | 811       | 342  | 29,7 | 821       | 288  | 26   | 780       | 315  | 28,7 | 869       | 358  | 29,1 | 252       | 124  | 32,9 |
| FA (agriculture)            | 242       | 44   | 15,4 | 253       | 46   | 15,4 | 299       | 55   | 15,5 | 274       | 52   | 15,9 | 38        | 9    | 19,1 |
| FSEJ: Law                   | 584       | 194  | 24,9 | 549       | 145  | 20,9 | 688       | 182  | 20,9 | 668       | 183  | 21,5 | 268       | 107  | 28,5 |
| FSEJ : Econ                 | 772       | 115  | 13   | 765       | 96   | 11,1 | 858       | 107  | 11   | 1013      | 144  | 12,4 | 337       | 54   | 13,8 |
| FLSH (arts, human sciences) | 2233      | 415  | 15,7 | 2711      | 586  | 17,8 | 1988      | 644  | 24,4 | 2246      | 726  | 24,4 | 2329      | 789  | 25,3 |
| ENS (education)             | 126       | 12   | 8,7  | 170       | 21   | 11   | 143       | 24   | 14,3 | 185       | 36   | 16,2 | 224       | 36   | 13,8 |
| TOTAL                       | 5645      | 1188 | 17,4 | 5894      | 1233 | 17,3 | 5259      | 1385 | 20,8 | 5819      | 1554 | 21   | 4108      | 1182 | 22,3 |

- **Private Higher Education Institutions**

**Table 2 : Evolution of students in higher education institutions by gender from 2003 to 2005 (MESSRT/DEP, 2005).**

| Year  | Males  |    | Females |    | Total |
|-------|--------|----|---------|----|-------|
|       | Number | %  | Number  | %  |       |
| 03/04 | 1296   | 60 | 866     | 40 | 2162  |
| 04/05 | 1670   | 60 | 1128    | 40 | 2798  |

- **Vocational Higher Education Institutions**

**Table 3 : Evolution of students in vocational higher education institutions 2000-2006 (MEBA/MESSRT, 2006).**

| Years                             | 2000-2001 |     |    | 2001-2002 |     |    | 2002-2003 |     |    | 2003-2004 |     |    | 2004-2005 |     |    | 2005-2006 |     |    |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----|----|-----------|-----|----|-----------|-----|----|-----------|-----|----|-----------|-----|----|-----------|-----|----|
|                                   | M         | F   | %F | M         | F   | %F | M         | F   | %F | M         | F   | %F | M         | F   | %F | M         | F   | %F |
| ENAM (administration and finance) | 225       | 135 | 38 | 247       | 142 | 37 | 262       | 153 | 37 | 309       | 187 | 38 | 314       | 233 | 43 | 271       | 214 | 44 |
| IFTIC (journalism)                | 96        | 52  | 35 | 102       | 54  | 35 | 93        | 62  | 40 | 75        | 61  | 45 | 62        | 54  | 47 | 82        | 52  | 39 |
| Ecole des Cadres (Administration) |           |     |    |           |     |    | 61        | 11  | 15 | 178       | 29  | 14 | 196       | 94  | 34 | 152       | 67  | 31 |
| WANGARI (Engineering)             |           |     |    | 68        | 51  | 43 | 54        | 38  | 41 | 30        | 29  | 49 | 27        | 11  | 29 | 24        | 6   | 20 |
| IRIMAG (Engineering)              |           |     |    |           |     |    | 37        | 32  | 46 | 78        | 103 | 57 | 92        | 160 | 64 | 134       | 233 | 64 |
| ESIE                              | 104       | 67  | 39 | 30        | 84  | 74 | 92        | 71  | 44 | 93        | 67  | 42 | 82        | 46  | 36 | 60        | 40  | 40 |
| ISP (Health)                      |           |     |    |           |     |    |           |     |    | 135       | 146 | 52 | 162       | 208 | 56 | 158       | 209 | 57 |
| IAI                               |           |     |    | 20        | 3   | 13 | 52        | 9   | 15 | 76        | 12  | 14 | 74        | 16  | 18 | 48        | 15  | 24 |

## 2.2 What does the Literature Say?

It is common knowledge among comparative education experts that historically, access to education has been more equitable among men and women, between urban and rural and between poor and rich in developing countries that espouse the “progressist” or rather socialist political ideology (i.e. case of Nicaragua during the Sandanista regime), Tanzania (Samoff, 1990) than the so called “capitalist” developing nations. Factors contributing to this equitable access to and eventual retention in education are undoubtedly the political ideology itself, which naturally instigates strong government support (institutional factors) for education. Countries such as Niger have lagged behind regarding education in general and particularly that of its

female citizens in primary, secondary as well as tertiary levels.

Little education literature has turned fully to identifying the reasons for the failure to provide equitable access to and retention in higher education. In political discourses, however, the blame is often put on the lack of financial resources. Scholars such as Moumouni (1994) underlined, among other reasons, the mismatch between the school curricula and the local cultures, which is exacerbated by the exclusive use of a colonial language, i.e., French, as the medium of instruction from the primary to the university levels of formal education. Some research, however, has identified other reasons contributing to blocking the access of women to and their retention in higher education.

Based on her research on the accessibility of ICT (Information and Communications Technologies) in South Africa, Ndlovu (2009) reported that “[i]t is apparent that accessibility of ICT is not only a matter of availability of physical resources in our schools but a social issue that cannot be eradicated as long as certain structures that promote divisions still exist” (p. 3). This implies that limiting access to simply a question of “physical resources” overshadows social factors.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Methods of Collecting Data**

- Document analysis (policy, program of study, university archives, etc.)
- Questionnaires (300 female students planned but 100 were actually administered)
- Interviews

**3.2 Participants:** 65 female students in the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences and School of Medicine (University Abdou Moumouni of Niamey), 35 female senior level students from three high schools (one public and two private), and one campus housing official. These data will help us understand the state of mind of the high school students regarding higher education. They will serve as a bridge to understanding higher education in Niger.

**3.3 Site:** Planned: Two public universities in Niamey (Niger); 1 private Canadian university in Niamey (Niger); 3 public IUT (University Institutes of Technology) in Tahoua, Maradi and Zinder (Niger)<sup>1</sup>; private institutes of higher learning in Niamey; 2 secondary schools (lycées) 1 public and 1 private.

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<sup>1</sup> These institutes became universities according to a recent government/ Ministry of Higher Education decree.

## 4. Presentation of the Findings

### 4.1 Findings from High School Students' Questionnaires

The following are the results from the questionnaires from the students. Let us report first the results of the questionnaires from the senior level (*terminale*) students. We received questionnaire data from thirty five (35) students of whom 20 were majoring in biology and natural/earth sciences (those are the ones who usually go into environmental and medical studies once at the university) and 15 from the liberal arts major (usually studying administration, finance, liberal arts or social sciences once at institutions of higher learning). The following table shows what schools (one public and two private) the 35 respondents were from in Niamey.

**Table 4: High school respondents**

| School   | Location | Respondents | %     |
|--|----------|-------------|-------|
| Lycée Issa Korombé (first national public high school) | Niamey   | 12          | 34.3% |
| Eau Vive (Private)                                     | Niamey   | 14          | 40%   |
| Boubou Hama (Private)                                  | Niamey   | 9           | 25.7% |
| <b>Total</b>   |          | 35          | 100%  |

**Table 5: Higher education institutions respondents**

| School                | Respondents | %     |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------|
| No Response           | 1           | 1.5%  |
| Arts & human sciences | 29          | 44.6% |
| Medical School        | 30          | 46.2% |
| Private Institute     | 5           | 7.7%  |
| <b>Total</b>          | 65          | 100%  |

Considering the socio-economic background of our participants might determine the students' pursuit of higher education, the following table gives a synopsis of these female students' parents' level of education:

**Table 6: High school respondents' parental level of education**

| Education     | No response | None     | Primary   | Secondary | Post-secondary/university | Total     |
|---------------|-------------|----------|-----------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Parent</b> |             |          |           |           |                           |           |
| <b>Father</b> | 11 (31.4%)  | 0        | 4 (11.4%) | 2 (5.7%)  | 18 (51.4%)                | 35 (100%) |
| <b>Mother</b> | 10 (28.6%)  | 1 (2.9%) | 4 (11.4%) | 9 (25.7%) | 11 (34.4%)                | 35 (100%) |

According to this table, 68.5% reported that their fathers had an education at primary (11.4%), secondary (5.7%), and post-secondary (51.4%) levels. This shows that the majority of parents received an education, the highest majority (more than half) being university educated. We can speculate that the 21 students who provided no response (11 for the father and 10 for mother) probably confused lack of education with no education at all. There is no other way to explain their failure to respond given that in a city such as Niamey, everyone finds it very

advantageous to report that their parents had an education. Lastly, two students reported having a guardian and both responded that their parent-guardian had a secondary school education. Therefore, the overall tendency is that the majority of these students live in educated middle class families. This trend predicts that the majority of the respondents would favor the pursuit of higher education at a university.

**Table 7: Future studies after high school (post-secondary) and preferred place of study**

| <b>Education Type</b>                          | <b>No response</b> | <b>University</b>     | <b>Science &amp; Technology Institute</b> | <b>Vocational schools</b> |
|--|--------------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------------|
| <b>Choice for future higher education type</b> | 1 (2.9%)           | 24 (68.6%)            | 0   | 10 (28.6%)                |
| <b>Where to pursue higher education?</b>       | 1 (2.9%)           | Niger: 16 (45.7%)     |   |                           |
|  |                    | Abroad: 18 (51.4%)    |   |                           |
| <b>Future degree pursuit</b>                   | 1 (2.9%)           | BA/ BS: 4 (11.4%)     |   |                           |
|  |                    | Masters: 5 (14.3%)    |   |                           |
|  |                    | Doctorate: 17 (48.6%) |   |                           |
|  |                    | Other: 8 (22.9%)      |   |                           |

This table shows that the majority of the female student respondents (68.6%) want to go to university while none decided to quit school from high school. However, more than half of these respondents mentioned that they want to study abroad, not in Niger. This response is not surprising given that as we shown in Table 6 above, the majority of the students were from middle class families. Middle class families believe in earning a degree abroad because it is more prestigious. However, they might want to study abroad also because of the travel opportunities that studying elsewhere provides or due to the multiple strikes on the national campus in Niamey that have in the past led to the invalidation of the academic year due to failure to fulfill the required hours per course. In addition, over 51.4% of these female students wish to study abroad. This is worth highlighting in a culture where, for fear of potential abuse and loss of their moral values, parents frown upon seeing their unmarried daughters go farther from home alone to study. This shows that indeed the majority of these young women have grown up in middle class families where, due to their parents' education, they learn the value of education and earning a diploma.

Although the majority of these female respondents were children of educated people, thus coming from middle class families, while up to 74% (26 out of 35 respondents) agreed that there exists no study major that should be specific for women, we still had 22.9% (8 respondents) who agreed that there were certain majors that women could not pursue. Table 6 shows that an average 10.5 (30%) students failed to respond to the question regarding their parents' education level. We posit that these respondents might have confused lack of education to none at all. In other words, their failure to respond to the question might mean that their parents did not attend school at all.

## 4.2 Findings from High University Students' Questionnaires

The results are presented in the following tables such as socio-economic indicators (parents' level of education, holding a baccalaureate degree, being married, having children, ownership of children, etc.), institutional (scholarship, availability of higher degree programs in schools, availability of campus accommodations, existence of campus support services such as accommodations, babysitting facilities, etc.) and other factors.

### 4.2.1 Factors Related to Socio-Economic Indicators

**Table 8: University respondents' parental level of education**

| Education<br>Parent | No response | None      | Primary   | Secondary  | Post-secondary/<br>University | Total     |
|---------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Mother</b>       | 8 (12.3%)   | 8 (12.3%) | 8 (12.3%) | 24 (36.9%) | 17 (26.2%)                    | 65 (100%) |
| <b>Father</b>       | 8 (12.3%)   | 1 (1.5%)  | 8 (12.3%) | 16 (24.6%) | 32 (49.2%)                    | 65 (100%) |

This table shows that 75.4% of the respondents reported that their mother had an education while up to 86.2% claimed that their father was educated. Of these percentages, 26.2% of mothers and 49.2% of fathers had a university education.

**Table 9: Degree prior to university enrollment**

| Baccalaureate (BAC)   | Responses | Percentage  |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| No response   | 2         | 3.1%        |
| BAC A (Arts & human sciences)                                     | 23        | 35.4%       |
| BAC C (Mathematics & Physical sciences)                           | 0         | 0.0%        |
| BAC D (Earth & natural sciences)                                  | 32        | 49.2%       |
| Others (i.e., University entrance certificate for civil servants) | 9         | 13.8%       |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>65</b> | <b>100%</b> |

This table shows that up to 84.6% of the respondents had their BAC before coming to the university which is a predictor of their being young university age students. Only 13.8% (9 respondents out of 65) entered the university with other entrance degrees such as that granted to civil servants to register at the university after they take a national exam. There is a strong correlation between the 84.6% of the respondents who have the baccalaureate (normal degree to go to school) and the report that 83.1% of them are between 18 and 29 years of age (44.6% between 18 and 23 and 38.5% between 24 and 29), a standard age range of university students today. The table also reflects the limited number of BAC C students among females given that none of the respondents had this mathematics and physical sciences university entrance degree.



**Table 10: Degree respondents want to pursue**

| Degree to pursue | Respondents | Percentage  |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| No response      | 2           | 3.1%        |
| BA/ BS           | 9           | 13.8%       |
| Masters          | 20          | 30.8%       |
| Doctorate        | 34          | 52.3%       |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>65</b>   | <b>100%</b> |

This table shows that up to 83.1% of the respondents want to pursue a graduate degree (Masters or Doctorate) while only nine respondents (13.8%) stop at the BA/BS degree level. It also is an exact match to the number of respondents who reported having another university entrance degree, which is more likely to be the degree that civil servants with a high school level of education but no baccalaureate earn to allow them to go to college as trainees. Holders of these degrees do not go beyond the BA/BS level as opposed to regular students due to their older age, burden of family they already have and the discouragement that earning a degree higher than BA/BS would not increase their salary significantly. The 10 of our respondents who reported being 30 years of age or more might have been former civil servants who returned to the university.

**Table 11: Respondents' marital status and children**

| Response<br>Status/ children | No response | single        | Married in monogamy | Married in polygamy | Number of Children |               |           |             |
|------------------------------|-------------|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------|-------------|
|                              |             |               |                     |                     | 0-1                | 1-3           | 4-6       | > 6         |
| Marital status               | 3<br>(4.6%) | 41<br>(63.1%) | 18<br>(27.7%)       | 3<br>(4.6%)         |                    |               |           |             |
| Number of children           | 1<br>(1.5%) |               |                     |                     | 50<br>(76.9%)      | 11<br>(16.9%) | 2<br>(3%) | 1<br>(1.5%) |

Regarding marital status, this table shows that 21 respondents (32%) were married while 41 (63.1%) reported being single. This number is lower than the 54 (83.1%) who would like to pursue graduate school. As for number of children, 50 of our respondents (almost 80%) reported having less than one child, 11 (17%) had 1 to 3 children while 2 (3%) had 4 to 6 children. One respondent had 6 children.

#### **4.2.2 Factors Related to the Institutional Indicators**

An interview with one of the student housing employees indicated that only two out of ten 143-room students' residence halls were allocated to female students on Université Abdou Moumouni campus. This means that only 586 (30.1%) of female students out of a total of 1944 in the academic year 2008-2009 could receive an accommodation on campus. Our questionnaires revealed the following table regarding accommodations for female students on campus:

**Table 12: Residence status of female students**

| Type of Accommodation | Number | Percentage |
|-----------------------|--------|------------|
| No response           | 21     | 32.3%      |
| On campus             | 9      | 13.8%      |
| Rent                  | 15     | 23.1%      |
| Guardian              | 14     | 21.5%      |
| Parents' house        | 5      | 7.7%       |
| At husband's house    | 1      | 1,5%       |
| Other                 | 0      | 0          |

The table reveals that out of the 44 female students who responded to the question to know if they had an accommodation, only 9 (13.8.4%) had a room on campus. Although 21 out of 65 students provided no response to the question, the table is showing that accommodation is unavailable to the majority of female students. Following this trend is the report that 36 of our respondents (55.5%) said that they did not have a personal space to study while only 19 (29.2%) had leisure time and space.

Likewise, 21 (32%) of our respondents thought that their school did not constitute an environment that was favorable to learning while 38 (58.5%) thought it did. Of our 65 respondents, only 26 (40%) had a full scholarship from the government while 23 (35%) received a one-time yearly support referred to as “*aide sociale*, i.e., social support to students”. To the question of whether the participants would pursue their studies towards a diploma, 34 (52%) responded that they wanted to pursue a doctorate while 20 reported that they wanted to pursue a master's degree totaling 83.1% wanting to pursue graduate school. The 34 potential pursuers correspond to the 30 respondents (46%) from the medical school where the doctorate degree is the only culminating degree that the school offers.

#### 4.2.3 Reasons for Abandoning Higher Education

**Table 13: Reasons girls drop out of higher education**

| Reasons                           | responses | %     |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-------|
| No response                       | 3         | 4.6%  |
| Marriage                          | 34        | 52.3% |
| Reconciling school & spousal life | 31        | 47.7% |
| Lack of financial support         | 48        | 73.8% |
| Difficulty to find accommodation  | 26        | 40%   |
| Bad school grades                 | 35        | 53.8% |
| Social prejudice (stigma)         | 20        | 30.8% |
| Way of Evaluating students        | 12        | 18.5% |
| Sexual harassment                 | 27        | 41%   |
| Pregnancy                         | 31        | 47.7% |
| Lack of baby-sitting facilities   | 11        | 16.9% |
| Other                             | 2         | 3.1%  |

This table shows that the reasons for women to drop out of higher education were:

lack of financial support (74%) followed by bad school grades (54%), marriage (52.3%), pregnancy (47.7%), reconciling spousal life with school (47.7%), sexual harassment (41%), accommodation difficulties (40%) and social prejudice (30%).

## 5. Discussion

From the above tables, 83% of our participants expressed the willingness to register for the Masters or Doctorate degree programs in spite of the majority not benefiting from fellowships or scholarships from the government. The rest of the female students who did not wish to continue onto graduate school consisted of government employees who returned to school to earn a higher university degree in order to have their salary increased. For this reason, these non-traditional students usually quit school once they earn their BS or BA degrees. That the labor laws in Niger are yet to differentiate BA/BS degree level salaries from those earned with a Master's degree constitutes another reason pushing these professional students to leave college as soon as they earn a BA/BS degree.

The above table also pointed to the tendency that marriage did not prevent the married students among our respondents from quitting school although when asked why they thought girls dropped out of college, 52.3% of them reported that marriage was the primary reason, ranking number 3. They still pursued their education and wished to go onto graduate school. Ideas related to marriage mainly the reconciliation of marital with school life and pregnancy followed marriage as primary reasons why girls quit school according to our respondents. However, none of these factors actually prevented them from pursuing their education with the majority wishing to continue onto graduate school.

Table 10 shows that close to 97% of the respondents want to finish their university degree while close to 77% reported that they had between 0 and 1 child, the other 23% having between 1 and 6 children. Yet none of them reported wishing to quit school although they had children and a spouse to take care of. Furthermore, as Table 12 shows, only less than 14% of the respondents benefitted from accommodation on campus. None of them, however, decided to drop out due to this reason. 58.5% of our respondents even reported that the living conditions in their school and university were favorable to effective learning although almost the same number (55%) among them reported that they did not own a private study space of their own.

The results of this study indicated that neither the socio-economic factors such as marriage, pregnancy, children, stigma of being a woman nor the institutional factors mainly lack of scholarship and adequate living conditions in particular accommodation on campus discouraged our respondents from pursuing and wishing to pursue their higher education. This contradicts our initial hypothesis that institutional factors would prevent girls from pursuing college. Therefore, the only plausible reason in favor of girls to go to school was their family background, i.e., their parents' level of education. These students being mostly from middle class families run by educated parents, had no other choice than striving to pursue university education, sometimes even when it took them to go abroad away from the family as reported by 51% of our high

school respondents. In the beginning of this paper, we even reported that more than 40% of female students in Niger tended to attend private vocational institutions of higher learning. Our respondents in this study contradict these statistics because the majority of them still want to pursue university education. This further supports our claim that our respondents' family background as children of (university-) educated parents determined their choice to pursue or wish to pursue higher education, the majority choosing to pursue a university education.

The part of our hypothesis that seemed to be confirmed in this study was that the program of study would determine women's access to and retention in higher education. The availability of the doctoral program at the faculty of medicine constituted a strong stimulus for women to pursue higher education. None of the students in that school wished to quit without reaching the milestone in spite of lack of accommodation on campus, lack of scholarship and lack of personal private study space. In other words possibility of access drove retention in the case of the school of medicine. From this claim, we, therefore, expect that, once fully implemented, access to the LMD (BA/BS, Master's and Doctorate) initiative will encourage more female access to and retention in higher education. Although not fully implemented, close to 31% of our respondents thought that the LMD initiative at the university level encouraged retention of girls in higher education.

As a result, we suggest that programs of study be made available to students at all institutions of higher education in particular at the university. It is common for the general public in Niger to believe that it is up to the government to employ every college graduate in the country. This erroneous belief tends to make the government hesitate to provide access to higher education to the youth lest it is asked to provide them with employment. The public is to be sensitized to believe that the government cannot be all things for all people even when it provides an education to all.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study was an investigation of factors hindering or contributing to women access to and retention in higher education in Niger. Results contradicted the initial hypothesis that institutional factors would determine women's access to and retention in higher education. Family background in particular parental level of education seemed to be the highest predictor of our participants' pursuit of higher education. Because most of our respondents grew up in middle class families due to their parents' level of education, they decided to remain and pursue higher degrees in college in spite of a hostile socio-economic environment (lack of scholarship, being married and having children) and institutional factors (lack of accommodation and personal space to study). The study also indicated that availability of degree programs (i.e., an access indicator) can determine women's pursuit for college education (i.e., retention) as is the case with the faculty of medicine.

Also, in that this study is confined to institutions in the capital city, this limitation calls for further research with students in institutions from other regions of the country in order

to see if the family background will still determine women access to and retention in higher education. More research is also needed in classrooms to see if there are teacher-related factors discouraging women from being in higher education

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