

GENDER EQUALITY AND PROTECTION FOR THE GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS: THE CASE OF AFGHANISTAN AND NIGERIA

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Abstract

Certain cultural practices and poverty have inhibited girls' and women's life chances and opportunities for long before the dawn of the 21st century, regardless of their number and productivity. Moreover, in most developing countries, girl-child education has not been given the priority it deserved. While the gender equality issue has gained global attention at the level of the United Nations since 1948, it is still regarded as 'unfinished business,' of our time. Therefore, the paper examines the vulnerability facing girl-child education and the protection needed to secure their education, for their self-dignity and sustainable development. The feminist theory is adopted, as well as the concept of the responsibility to protect (R2P). The study is descriptive and utilizes data from books, journals, newspapers, and websites of relevant organizations, especially the UN, UNESCO, and UNICEF. Content analysis of daily news feeds, from verified media stables, provides authentic data. Findings revealed that the girl-child is more vulnerable than the boy-child in conflict environments. There is a deliberate assault on girl-child education. More girls are out-of-school than boys. Both the domestic and foreign policies of the Nigerian and Afghan governments clearly showed the extent of their responsibility to protect girl-child education, partly to achieve the UN and AU quality education goal. The paper concludes that the protection of girl-child education must be made a priority of the state because the female gender is the bearer of life and reproductive sustainability. The girl-child should be provided with free quality education to be equipped for economic empowerment. School premises in conflict environments need to be more fortified from terrorists, bandits, and kidnappers. Intelligence gatherings need to be broadened and sustained such that government security agencies should not only be on the defensive but also the offensive against terrorist operational bases.

Keywords: Gender equality, Girl-child education, Conflict environments, Afghanistan, Nigeria

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Introduction

The realisation that the female gender plays important roles in society but is subjected to discriminatory outcomes eventuated a number of United Nations (UN) actions and resolutions on gender equality. Typical among these are the United Nations Women (UNW), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and “The girl child” is one of the critical areas of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (Bureau of International Information Programs, United States Department of State, 2012). In particular, girls’ rights are provided for in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes non-discrimination, protection from harm, and abuse. A violation of the right of the girl-child, in particular, to education in a conflict situation is as troubling as her right to sexuality and must be protected.

Education is power and the driving force for social change and development. But in any society where gender imbalance exists, more often skewed against the female, sustainable development becomes asymmetrical. From the beginning of human civilization, cultural practices regarding the treatment of girl-child have been a major problem but this has now been compounded by increasing cases of conflict around the world. In conflict situations, women and children are the most gravely affected (Madzima, 2013), in particular, schooling for the girl-child which they are prevented. What measures are to protect and secure the rights of the victims of conflict, especially the girl-children? In addressing the issue, the study is divided into four sections. First is this introductory section. Second is the background and theoretical perspectives. Gender equality and the protection of girl-child education are examined in the third section. The protection of the girl-child education in conflict environments and the role of the state and international organisations are critically analysed in this section and the conclusion.

Background and Theoretical Perspectives

From 1996 to 2001, Afghanistan was under Taliban rule, while the Boko Haram insurgency started in Nigeria in 2009. Afghanistan, meaning “land of the Afghans” or “Afghan land”, is a Central Asian country that has a long history of subjugation and is ruled by rival domestic and foreign powers (Erinn, 2003). The United States dislodged the Taliban from power on October 7, 2001, in response to September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S. [Osama bin Laden, the celebrated mastermind of the attacks was believed to be harboured by the Taliban government in Afghanistan].

However, the Taliban still controlled a significant portion of the country, for most of the 20 years of U.S. presence. The 20-year-long conflict between the Afghani government and the Taliban reached a climax, with the 2021 Taliban offensive, resulting in the fall of Kabul, the capital, which returned the Taliban to power (Ishak, 2021). The Taliban's return to power is the least Afghani women would ever have contemplated. Indeed, their return can best be described as a catastrophe and a failure of the collective resolve of the Afghans and the international hegemon.

The Taliban, meaning 'students' or 'seekers' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), of Islamic fundamental doctrine, refers to itself as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) (Lederer, 2013). It is a 'Deobandi Islamist' religious-political movement and military organization in Afghanistan, regarded by many governments and organizations as a 'terrorists' group. Regardless of this branding, the Taliban has de jure control of Afghanistan (1996-2001) and, again, since August 15, 2021. They adhere strictly to the Sharia Law as the instrument of rule and administration and, with a particular aversion for female education and socioeconomic and political freedom.

Nigeria, on the other hand, is a West African country, an amalgam of diverse ethnoreligious mix and the most populous black country in the world. Since 2009, the country has been under the grip of portentous militant and terrorist groups, principal among them is Boko Haram. This Islamist militant group is officially known as The Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, which, in Arabic, means "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad" (BBC, 2016). To many governments and organizations, the group is a terrorist organization based in North-eastern Nigeria, which is also active in neighbouring countries of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (US State Department, 2013). Boko Haram, in the local Hausa dialect, (widely spoken in many West African countries), means "Western education is forbidden." Fundamentally, for this reason, the group has made one of its major targets attacks on schools in the North-eastern and Central states of Nigeria.

Clearly, both Afghanistan and Nigeria are compared on the premise that the Islamist groups operating in the two countries target female education. This has created a serious setback for development in the education sector in the affected areas. While the Taliban has had and is still having, full control of the Afghan government, Boko Haram has been having some grips on north-eastern Nigerian states. This has negatively impacted the girl-child education in the region. In some literature, Boko Haram is referred to as the "Nigerian Taliban" (Australian National Security, n.d.). Indeed, Boko Haram has the primary objective to establish an Islamic state

in Nigeria governed by Shariah law. The Taliban and Boko Haram have Sharia Law as their constitution and claim to fight corruption. While it is true that both Afghanistan and Nigeria are corrupt-ridden countries, sadly, the Taliban and Boko Haram, and other Islamist terror groups, do not see turning women and girls into sex slaves as corruption.

Already, the Taliban is in power in Afghanistan since August 2021. However, Boko Haram is still in a relentless fight to seize control of northern Nigeria and subsequently overthrow the Nigerian government and create an Islamic state (BBC, 2016). That may not be an easy work over for Boko Haram because of other militant and cultural groups in southern Nigeria, principally the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), demanding an Igbo sovereign nation, and the Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC). The OPC's final goal is the creation of the Oduduwa (Oodua) Republic (The New Humanitarian, 2000). These groups have a love for education, at least without any track record of hate for it. These militant-nationalist groups constitute a countervailing force and buffer against the Boko Haram insurgency to overrunning the entire Nigerian state, as did the Taliban in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, both the Taliban and Boko Haram promote a version of Islam that makes it "haram", or forbidden, for Muslims to take part in any political voting (democratic elections) or social activity associated with Western society, in particular secular education. And the efforts at protecting women and girls' rights remain a grave concern for development and education stakeholders globally.

Gender Equality and the Protection of the Girl-Child Education

While gender equality would mean that all genders have equal opportunities, free to pursue whatever career, lifestyle choice, and abilities they want, without discrimination, several studies have shown that the female gender has suffered some discrimination and violence. In particular in violent environments, women and girls suffer more, especially in their inability to defend themselves against sexual intrusion and violation. In this regard, some women and girls become victims of unwanted pregnancies and are more likely to have their education truncated. Women and girls suffer unequally from violent conflict, compared to men and boys. They suffer not only as by-products of war but are also "targeted as a strategy of war" (Kangas, Haider, & Fraser., 2015). This is coupled with a state policy, of an anachronist and misogynist government, that restricts female education. Before the Taliban came to power, first in the 1990s, education was highly regarded in Afghanistan, and Kabul University attracted students from across Asia and the Middle East (BBC, n.d.). However, the Taliban

imposed restrictions on modern education, banned female education, and encouraged only Islamic religious schools and the teaching of the Quran. Almost half of the schools in Afghanistan were either closed or destroyed (BBC, n.d.). The Taliban have carried out brutal and atrocious attacks on teachers and students and threatened parents and teachers (Human Rights Watch, 2006) with death. In a 1998 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report, 9 out of 10 girls and 2 out of 3 boys did not enroll in schools in Afghanistan. By 2000, less than 5 percent of Afghan children were being educated at the primary school level and even fewer at higher secondary and university levels (BBC, n.d.). Attacks on educational institutions, students, and teachers and the forced enforcement of Islamic teachings have continued even after the Taliban were deposed from power.

From 2001-2021, in Afghanistan, the underlining reasons for low girls' enrolment have been insecurity and traditional norms and practices related to girls and women's roles in society. Other reasons can be explained in part, by a lack of female teachers, especially in rural schools. According to UNICEF, only 16 percent of Afghanistan's schools are girls-only, and many of them lack proper sanitation facilities, which further hinder attendance. Certain sociocultural factors and traditional beliefs also undermine girls' education. For instance, the fundamentalists continue to marry out girls at a very young age, of which about 17 percent of them do before their 15th birthday. In the poorest and remote areas of the country, enrolment levels vary extensively and girls still lack equal access. An estimated 3.7 million children are out-of-school in Afghanistan, and 60 percent of them are girls (UNICEF, n.d.1).

By 2017, 16 years after the US-led military intervention that overthrew the Taliban government, an estimated two-thirds of Afghan girls were still out of school. Because the security in the country worsened, the progress that had been made toward the goal of getting all girls into school was reversed, resulting in a decline in girls' education in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The Taliban remained active in pushing back on female education as they step up their attacks on schools. In December 2017, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that "over 1,000 schools had been destroyed, damaged or occupied and 100s of teachers and students killed by the Taliban" (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2018).

The high-profile case of Taliban attacks on girl-child education was on Malala Yousafzai. On October 9, 2012, a 15-year-old Pakistani girl was shot by a Taliban gunman along the Swat Valley in Pakistan. Her only 'crime' was advocating for the right of girls to be educated (Husain, 2013).

But in a twist of fate, Malala's life has forever changed by a Taliban bullet as she has since furthered her education in Britain and graduated from the prestigious Oxford University. Yousafzai, indeed, became the youngest person to receive a Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 at just 17-years-old, for her campaigning for girls' education rights in Pakistan (McKeever, 2020). Yousafzai and her father started the Malala Fund back in 2013 to help ensure girls get 12 years of "free, safe (and) quality education." Apple—the tech giant—announced a "partnership with the Fund" in 2018, expanding its financing to India and Latin America and offering secondary education for 100,000 girls (McKeever, 2020).

After 20 years of US presence in Afghanistan, sadly, the Taliban Islamist is again in control of Afghanistan, with trepidation of restricting girls' and women's education. On August 30, 2021, within 20 days of the Taliban's grip on power in Afghanistan, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, the Taliban's acting minister for higher education met with elders, known as a *loya jirga*, informing them of a new decree. As India Today reports, Haqqani declares that women would be allowed to study at universities but there would be "a ban on mixed classes" under their rule. The decree requires female students and teachers to wear black clothing in college. It states that a "Sharia partition" must be erected for current classes with girls under the age of 15, to keep male and female students apart. According to the new rule, same-gender teachers would be allowed to teach students. As The Guardian quoted from the letter, "In the future, all universities should provide female teachers for women's classes. They should also try to use older teachers with a good background" (India Today, 2021). Having all female teachers for female classes and wearing veils is not the problem, but the rules imply that it would force them to drop out. India Today explains: "With fewer female students and lack of space in educational institutions, teachers fear it would be difficult to abide by the Taliban's new decree, thus forcing women and girls to drop out" (India Today, 2021).

Afghan women have spoken to the Taliban in open protests, but it remains to be seen if that would yield any positive results. The glaring exclusion of any female in the initial government portfolios indicates the Afghan Taliban government's position on women. The Taliban had said before that the reason girls could not study and women could not work was because the security situation was not good. They promised an inclusive government where women will have rights. However, the developments since they took control were indicative of a repeat of their previous rule of oppression. As Samira Hamidi, of Amnesty International, wrote in her Twitter thread, "women have disappeared from political, social & economic spaces. Women-led NGOs are searched, questioned, and have been asked

to remain shut. Prominent women activists are threatened through calls, messages, and social media” (India Today, 2021).

Hamidi further states that the “Taliban have asked women to stay at home as they don’t think their militants are trained enough to respect them”. Women were sent back from offices, banks, and media outlets and asked to stay indoors. In every discussion on future possible governance structures, women are being ignored. Samira added, “Gender segregated studies (are) imposed in schools & universities. Taliban don’t think women should be part of senior roles in the new government. Prominent women activists stuck across country fearing their safety” (India Today, 2021). Two salient points are deducible from this thread. First, the Taliban absolves itself from any responsibility to protect women’s rights, either in a violent situation or to have modern education. Second, the inclusive government so-promised has excluded women from high-level decision-making positions.

Nevertheless, the Taliban’s Afghanistan is far from political and economic stability, and the possibility still exists that international influence can have some impact on their style of governance. Meanwhile, there are some resolute minds like Afghan Girls’ Education activist, Pashtana Durrani, 23, who is wary of Taliban promises and antics. As she told Reuters, “They have to walk the talk. Right now, they’re not doing that,” referring to assurances that girls would be allowed to attend schools. She has determined that, If they limit the curriculum, I am going to upload more books to (an) online library. If they limit the internet ... I will send books to homes. If they limit teachers, I will start an underground school, so I have an answer for their fundamentalism” (India Today, 2021). Pashtana is determined to go underground as the solution to the antics and anachronistic fundamentalism of the Taliban, with great danger to herself.

In Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency continues to have a negative impact on education, especially on girl-child education in northern Nigeria, in addition to other socio-cultural and economic factors. According to UNICEF, about 13.5 million Nigerian children aged 5-14 years are out of school. In northern Nigeria, the situation is bleaker, as more than 60 percent of the out-of-school children are girls, mostly in the north. UNICEF reports that gender, like geography and poverty, is an important factor in the pattern of educational marginalisation. “States in the north-east and north-west have female primary net attendance rates of 47.7 percent and 47.3 percent, respectively, meaning that more than half of girls are not in school (UNICEF, n.d.2).

The education deprivation in northern Nigeria is driven by various factors, including economic deprivation and socio-cultural norms and practices that discourage attendance in formal education, especially for girls. In some parts of northern Nigeria, 2.8 million children are in need of education-in-emergencies support in the conflict-affected states of Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Zamfara, Niger, and Kaduna. Boko Haram insurgent operations are more prevalent in these states than in others. In these States, at least 802 schools remain closed and 497 classrooms were listed as destroyed, with another 1,392 damaged (UNICEF, n.d.3). While damaged or destroyed classrooms could be repaired, some girls that have fallen prey to Boko Haram banditry have had their education terminated and suffered life-long trauma.

Such was the case of the Chibok girls, most of whom were married off to Boko Haram fighters, bore children, and lived difficult lives in the forest. In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped as many as 276 schoolgirls from their school in Chibok, Borno State. The Islamic extremists inevitably forcefully married them and even sold some of the schoolgirls as child brides (Borgen Magazine, 2017). In February 2021, some 300 schoolgirls were abducted from Government Girls' Secondary School, in Jangebe, Zamfara state, north-west Nigeria. (Akinwotu, 2021). It was the third mass kidnapping of students within a space of three months in an escalating wave of rural attacks blamed on groups of armed bandits. After spending about a week in captivity, the schoolgirls were released, following nerve-rending bargaining with the jihadists, and forced ransoms from parents.

In December 2020, more than 300 boys were kidnapped from a school in Kankara, Katsina state, in Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari's home state, while he was visiting the region (The Guardian, 2021). Again, the boys were later released but the incident triggered outrage and memories of the kidnappings of 276 schoolgirls by jihadists in Chibok that shocked the world. Many of those girls are still unaccounted for, even after several protest rallies by the "BringBackOurGirls" pressure group. Ironically, authors Joe Parkinson and Drew Hinshaw assert that 'The U.S.'s failed efforts to rescue the Chibok girls kidnapped by Boko Haram illustrate the limits of its power' (Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2021). While the state has a responsibility to protect, the stark reality is that sometimes, exercising that power may not be as simple or as easy walkover, in some peculiar terrain, especially in mountainous regions and dense tropical forest areas.

Heavily armed criminal gangs in northwest and central Nigeria have stepped up attacks, since 2016, including kidnapping for ransom, raping and pillaging, and exploiting a lack of security. The groups have often

staged attacks from their haven in expansive forests, stretching from northwest Nigeria into the Niger Republic. Attacks have continued despite several raids by the Nigeria Air Force and Army operations. In one incident, the terrorists shot down a Nigerian air force fighter plane over Zamfara state after a raid on their hideout. As the BBC reported, the pilot, Flight Lt. Abayomi Dairo ejected and used “survival instincts” to avoid capture at the border between Zamfara and Kaduna states. According to the Air Force, “through these intensive air operations, hundreds of bandits have been neutralised and several of their hideouts destroyed” (Ewofor, 2021). While the efforts of the military should be commended in fighting the terror groups, it remains puzzling why non-state actors, such as the terrorists, appear to be more sophisticated than the state. Under such prevailing circumstances, the citizens would remain the captives of the mightiest, a captive state.

As the terrorists are relentless, demanding whooping ransoms for the release of school children, some parents of freed students vowed not to return them to school until the state governments make schools safe in their areas. On May 30, 2021, armed bandits kidnapped 136 students from the Salihu Tanko Islamiyya School in Tegina, Rafi Local Government Area, in Niger state. While some of the students were released a day after the kidnap, a few were believed to have escaped from their abductors. On August 30, 2021, 90 of them were released after their parents paid a hefty ransom. As the PREMIUM TIMES reported, the ransom consisted of N60 million in cash and five new motorcycles (Maishanu, 2021).

Kidnapping for ransom in Africa’s most populous country is a widespread problem, with businessmen, officials and ordinary citizens snatched from the streets by criminal gangs seeking ransom money. In the case of school children abducted for ransom, authorities have denied paying any ransom to secure such releases. Although most security analysts say this is unlikely and observers fear it will lead to an increase in kidnappings in these regions plagued by extreme poverty. At least \$11m (£8m) was paid to kidnapers between January 2016 and March 2020, according to SB Morgen, a Lagos-based geopolitical research consultancy (Akinwotu, 2021).

Due to the overreaching ransoms, the volatile and insecure environment in the most affected northern states of Nigeria, many schools have been forced to close down, notably in Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Zamfara, Niger, and Adamawa states. As of March 15, 2021, THISDAY reported that some 618 schools have remained closed in six northern states over the fear of attack and abduction of pupils and members of staff. By September 5, 2021, the Adamawa State governor, Ahmadu Fintiri, ordered the closure of

30 boarding schools in the state, due to security concerns. The government closed 30 boarding junior secondary schools out of the 34 schools in the state and de-boarded them with effect from 6th September 2021. By the official statement, “this becomes necessary due to the present incessant security challenges faced by the country and owing to students’ tender age, hence the need for them to study under the care of their parents”. It further stated that “all students from the affected schools are to be placed to the nearest public junior secondary schools within their catchment or domicile areas” (Saharareporters, 2021).

The government’s action may be viewed as proactive, but, of course, the government is partly absolving itself from being responsible for the protection of schools. The measure is not sufficient in preventing the vulnerability of schools from terrorist attacks because day schools are equally open to attacks. Towards this end, Nigerian Vice President Yemi Osinbajo has ‘urged the nation’s security and intelligence agencies to reinvent itself and adopt a more empirical and data-driven institutional culture defined by analytical and forensic rigour, while also emphasizing inter-agency collaboration and synergy. The Vice President revealed that President Buhari “signed a supplementary budget of N802 billion for the military, security and intelligence agencies. This was in keeping with his commitment since the outset of this administration to ensure that those charged with keeping Nigerians safe are adequately equipped for the job” (Ogundele, 2021). Ironically, the supplementary budget of N802 billion mentioned here was during the Fiscal Year 2020/2021, a period that witnessed the most audacious terrorist activities and assaults on schools in northern Nigeria. The expected impact of what N802 billion was spent for was not felt as security was at its lowest ebb, as reflected in this study.

Aside from states, non-governmental organizations are also playing their parts to protect education. The first ‘International Day to Protect Education from Attack’ was marked on September 9, 2020, to safeguard education in an armed conflict environment. On May 29, 2020, the United Nations General Assembly designated 9 September every year, as International Day to Protect Education. The designation coincided with the fifth anniversary of the Safe Schools Declaration, an inter-governmental commitment led by Norway and Argentina to protect education at all levels (Protecting Education, 2021). Attacks on education are a global concern that has necessitated the Safe Schools Declaration and the founding of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA). The International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration held in Abuja, Nigeria, on October 25-27, 2021, was the fourth in a series held to galvanize support for the Declaration and review progress in achieving its commitments (Protecting Education, 2021).

While Nigeria hosted the Conference on Safe Schools in 2021, the first meeting of states on the declaration to be held in Africa, the situation in Nigeria is slightly different from what obtains in some countries. The Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict provided important ‘guidance to all parties to armed conflict in better-protecting education institutions and preventing them from becoming targets for opposing forces’ (Protecting Education, 2020). While ‘many countries have revised their policies to restrict the use of schools and universities for military purposes, the Islamic groups in Afghanistan and Nigeria have peculiar misogynies, making the female gender a deliberate target.

At the Conference in Abuja, the Nigerian President Buhari was represented by Nigeria’s former Permanent Representative at the United Nations, Prof Ibrahim Gambari. As Chief of Staff to the president, Gambari affirms that “the incessant attacks on the country’s educational system in the form of kidnapping, abduction of pupils; students through the increased activities of insurgents and general insecurity in our schools have been chief among contributing factors responsible for the growing number of out-of-school children.” According to him, there are over 12 million children currently out of school in Nigeria and the wider implication of the incidence is that of “a generation of children traumatised and afraid of going to school, especially the girl child” (Channels TV, 2021).

While lamenting and acknowledging the security challenges facing education in the country, the presidency ‘assured that efforts are ongoing to curb the ugly trend’. According to the country’s former Permanent Representative to the UN, the insecurity “. . . remains a challenge that we are working towards overcoming by deploying orthodox and unorthodox methods (Channels TV, 2021). What he meant by “deploying orthodox and unorthodox methods” is nebulous. However, what is clear is that the government acquired new weaponry for the military, to fight the Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and kidnappings, consisting of 12 Super Tucano A-29 surveillance and attack planes, among other weapons (Kazeem, 2017).

The government admits that ‘it has been tough dealing with these security challenges and their effect.’ It is, therefore, hoped that as leaders from around the world come together to share good practices in protecting education from attack, new strategies should be developed to address the peculiarities in Afghanistan and Nigeria, among other volatile environments. As volatile and conflict-prone environment as Afghanistan is, individual private citizens are making their contribution to protect girls’

education. Pashdana, of the Afghan Girls' Education, whose effort has been alluded to, has determined to side-step the Taliban antics against girls' and women's education in Afghanistan.

Also, it is important to note that, the Taliban's aversion to female education may not run through their entire ranks, as the work of Habib-ur-Rahman, in Badikhel village in south-eastern Afghanistan reveals. Since 2019, as Emran Feroz and Abdul Rahman Lakanwal write in *Foreign Policy*, Habib-ur-Rahman has been running a small girls' school in his own home in Badikhel in a remote area of rural Afghanistan, largely dominated by the Taliban. According to the villagers, the insurgents have "assured them that they have no qualms" with Rahman girls' school. Some of the girls at Rahman's school are actually "related to active Taliban members". Rahman told *Foreign Policy*: "Some of my students are daughters, sisters, or nieces of Taliban fighters. Mostly, all of these men are not living in our village." "They are busy with fighting and hiding. But they encouraged their relatives to visit my school and get educated." (*Foreign Policy*, 2020).

Latifa Khostai, one of Rahman's students, says, "My brother is a Taliban fighter. But he does not have any problems with the school. He wants me to seek wisdom and education". Even as the US and Allied Forces had departed and the Taliban has rein of power, Rahman says he is cautiously hopeful that things would not go back to the way they were before. He affirms, "I'm proud of my work, and I know that it's dismantling a lot of prejudices. Education is an important part of the Islamic religion. The Taliban know that too, but it seems that they don't have a clear stance on girls' education" (*Foreign Policy*, 2020). But educating the Taliban on female education and the responsibility to protect them would be a herculean task that requires sustained push.

In the mean, Community-Based Education (CBE) programs are often an Afghan girl's only chance at a safe and quality education. The opening of a nearby CBE can mean access to education for girls who would otherwise miss school, and research has demonstrated the effectiveness of CBEs at increasing enrolment and test scores, especially for girls (*Human Rights Watch*, 2017). CBEs can be an effective strategy to tackle many of the systemic barriers to girls' education, including the long distances to school, insecurity on the route to school, and the lack of female teachers, among others. However, to date, CBEs are exclusively operated by NGOs and entirely funded by foreign donors. The absence of long-term strategic thinking by government and donors exposes CBE programmes—and students—to unpredictable closures, which can compromise students' educational future.

In order not to compromise the future education of the young generation, the government, organizations, and concerned citizens have the onerous responsibility to protect education, especially for the girl-children. Perhaps, it is one of the important ways to ensure the realisation of United Nations SDG 6 and African Union Goal 2 of Agenda 2063 (The African Union Commission, 2018). Part of the targets of SDG 6 is to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, with special attention to the needs of women and girls in vulnerable situations, such as conflict. The challenges international organizations, national governments, institutions, and citizens face in implementing quality education in a changing political and conflict landscape must be adequately addressed. Frankly, extra efforts are now required to achieve quality education, among other goals set by the UN and AU, in 2030 and 2063 respectively, in the face of grand attacks on education in Afghanistan and northern Nigeria.

Conclusion

Gender equality and protection for girl-child education in conflict environments is a priority that requires adequate attention and action. The case of Afghanistan and Nigeria is a reflection of any conflict environment globally, which needs mitigation to achieve the goals of sustainable development. The AU 2063 Goal 17 is anchored on full gender equality in all spheres of life, prohibitive violence, and discrimination against women and girls as a priority, while SDG 5 focuses on achieving gender equality and empowerment of women and girls (African Union Commission, n.d.). Gender equality requires that women and girls everywhere must have equal rights and opportunities, and be able to live free of violence and discrimination (UN Women, n.d.). These aspirations and goals need be unachievable in the face of an onslaught against girl-children education in Afghanistan and Nigeria, and other conflict environments elsewhere in the world. Efforts must be sustained by the Nigerian and Afghan governments and supranational organisations to protect the violent attacks against education. In particular, since the Taliban that rules Afghanistan has aversion to female education and the rights of women, the international community will have to prevail over the Taliban as they push for diplomatic recognition and legitimacy from their neighbouring countries and the wider world. The interest of the Afghan people must be paramount in regional and global relations with the regime, to ensure the safety of the female gender now and secure their future.

More drastic actions are needed from the national government to go on the offensive after the terror groups. In addition, efforts should be increased to fortify school premises against easy access for terrorists. To do this effectively, an intelligence-gathering strategy would need adequate collaboration among the security agencies and the indigenous people.

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