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PERSPECTIVE: Female schooling under threat

By M. Niaz Asadullah - 12 October 2014 @ 8:04 AM

IN many parts of the world, children's education continues to suffer because of prolonged localised conflicts. Particularly vulnerable are girls in multiethnic countries such as Sudan, Nigeria and Pakistan where violent opposition from radical forces today pose a serious threat to female schooling.

For instance, in less than two years since the Taliban assault on Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan, as many as 276 girls were abducted from their boarding school in north-eastern Nigeria by gunmen from the extremist Boko Haram group.

Far away in East Asia, a multiracial country like Nigeria has made steady progress in girls' education and kept extremists at bay. Muslims in Malaysia and Nigeria account for approximately 65 per cent and 50 per cent of the population respectively.

Yet groups like Boko Haram remain marginalised in Malaysia. The site of the abduction is in the Borno state where nearly half of the 10-year-old girls remained out of school in 2011, a situation Malaysia overcame nearly three decades ago.

Progress towards female schooling in Malaysia was never under threat because of religious extremism, thanks to the government's pro-development policies that delivered education for all irrespective of race, religion and gender. The country's abundant natural resources were utilised productively to build schools and boost literacy rates in the early years.

Long before experiencing double-digit growth rates, Malaysia invested in education including female schooling. In 1970, gross female primary school enrolment was as high as 83 per cent compared to only 30 per cent in Nigeria.

These gaps remain wide even today. In 2005, 31 per cent of Nigerian girls were in secondary education compared to 73 per cent in Malaysia. More so, while Malaysia has removed gender inequality in access to education at primary and secondary education, girls still lag behind boys in Nigeria. For instance, primary enrolment rate for girls was 79 respectively against 87 for boys in 2010.

Today the absence of good governance has aided widespread corruption, extremism and fuelled demand for a puritan Islamic regime in Nigeria.

Even five months after the abduction of the Chibok girls from the Borno state, the government has failed to return them safely to their parents; although some of the girls managed to escape, as many as 219 still remain missing.

Unsurprisingly most view Nigeria today as an example of a “failed state” where the government wasted the country’s natural resource rent by not spending it to create more places in schools and beds in hospitals. Consequently schooling and health outcomes have remained low, particularly for girls.

With a population nearly six times that of Malaysia, Nigeria is central to Africa’s success in meeting Millennium Development Goals targets such as gender equality and universal access to education for all.

In a country where a woman on average has five babies, contraception prevalence rate is 14 per cent (in 2008) and infant and under-5 mortality rates are 88 and 142 respectively (in 2010), investment in girl’s education remains key to achieving social progress.

Surely investments in social outcomes by the Nigerian government can aid the process of economic development in the long-run.

After all Malaysia’s early investment in schooling aided the process of economic growth in later years.

But that is only half of the story. Malaysia’s emphasis on maintaining racial harmony meant that social divisions didn’t lead to conflicts and civilian unrest. Political stability and order helped sustain gains from progress in human development.

Today, ongoing extremism and violence is destroying schools as well as parents’ aspirations to educate their daughters in Nigeria. The world community is therefore right to express its anger at the abduction of Nigerian schoolgirls and condemn the attacks by extremists and insurgents. The international pressure must continue so that the Nigerian government brings back all the missing schoolgirls.

The rule of law must be established and extremism needs to be tackled. Restoring an inclusive and safe social environment for all children is the first step towards closing the big gap that has opened up in girls’ schooling between Nigeria and other Muslim countries like Malaysia.

The writer is deputy director of the Centre for Poverty and Development Studies and professor of development economics at the University of Malaya. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.



Enrolment of schoolgirls lags behind boys in Nigeria.

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Progress towards female schooling in Malaysia was never under threat

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