Beyond “the Other Room”: Girls’ Education, Displacement, and Everyday Violence in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This essay places my experience alongside research on girls’ education in Northern Nigeria, where poverty, gender norms, child labor, early marriage, and insecurity continue to limit educational opportunities. For girls living in communities affected by Boko Haram insurgency, these barriers have been intensified by attacks on schools, abductions, and displacement. Displacement, however, does not necessarily mean safety. Research on internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in northeastern Nigeria documents continuing risks of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation, forced and early marriage, and other forms of violence against girls and young women (Marlow et al., 2022; Oriola & Moen, 2025). By bringing personal narrative into conversation with this research, I argue that girls’ educational exclusion cannot be separated from the violence and insecurity surrounding their everyday lives. For a girl forced from her home by conflict, the question is not simply whether she can return to school, but whether she can find a place where she is safe enough to learn.

Introduction

My earliest memories of childhood are not unhappy ones. I was born into a middle-class family in southwestern Nigeria. My mother was a fashion designer, my father sold cars, and I had an older brother. We were not wealthy, but my parents could afford to send us to school. As a young girl, I did not think of education as something I would one day have to fight for. I simply assumed school was part of growing up. That certainty did not last. When I was about six years old, my parents’ marriage began to fall apart. Some memories from this period have blurred with time, but others remain painfully clear. I remember a father whose return from work once meant excitement because he often came home bearing gifts. Later, the same sound of him coming home brought fear as I watched his anger turn into violence against my mother. Eventually, my parents separated, and by the age of nine, I was living with my maternal grandparents. I thought living with family would bring stability. Instead, I learned very quickly what being a girl could require. My mornings began around five. Before putting on my school uniform, I cooked, cleaned, fetched water, swept the house, and helped prepare meals for a household filled with adults. By 7:30 a.m., I was expected to have completed my responsibilities and still be ready for school. Many mornings, I arrived late and already exhausted. When school ended, another workday began: going to the market, preparing meals, washing dishes, cleaning, and helping my grandmother hawk goods on the street. Homework came last, if there was time and energy left.

No one told me that girls should not be educated. I was, after all, still going to school. Yet I was beginning to learn something more complicated: being allowed to attend school is not the same as being given a fair opportunity to learn. Research on girls’ education similarly shows how poverty and gender expectations can combine to make educational opportunities unequal even where schooling is formally available (Ombati & Ombati, 2012).

In my case, those pressures eventually appeared in my schooling. I did not pass English in my first West African Senior School Certificate Examination, a subject I needed to continue my education. Instead of immediately being given another opportunity to retake the examination, I spent the next three years at home as a full-time "house girl," cooking, cleaning, going to the market, and hawking. I watched other young people continue their education while I waited for someone else to decide when I could continue mine.

When I was finally given another opportunity, I passed the examinations I needed and eventually completed a National Diploma in Business Studies. I thought I had moved beyond the years when other people could interrupt my education. I was wrong. After graduation, I needed to complete an internship, but my grandparents refused. As far as they were concerned, I had already gone far enough. I could read and write, and I had a diploma. What more did I need? Years later, former Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari would famously say that his wife belonged to his "kitchen," "living room," and "the other room" (BBC News, 2016). The statement attracted widespread criticism, but the idea behind it was painfully familiar to me. The kitchen had already occupied a significant part of my childhood. What Buhari expressed publicly was something I encountered much more quietly: expectations about where women belong, what girls should do, and how much ambition is considered appropriate for them.

This is why I think of "the other room" as more than a physical place. It can also be a boundary around a girl's possibilities. Sometimes that boundary is domestic labor. Sometimes it is poverty or marriage. Sometimes it is simply the belief that a girl has already received enough education. My childhood was not in Northern Nigeria, and I do not present my experience as representative of girls growing up there. But my experience provides the place from which I ask a larger question: What happens to a girl's education when being a girl shapes the obstacles she must overcome to learn?

When the Classroom Becomes Dangerous

For girls in Northern Nigeria, this question carries particular urgency. UNICEF (2022) estimated 7.6 million girls were out of school at the primary and junior secondary levels in Nigeria, with 48% of out-of-school girls concentrated in the Northwest and Northeast. Behind those numbers are girls whose education is shaped by economic hardship, gender expectations, domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and insecurity. The statistics tell us how many girls are missing from classrooms; they do not always tell us what happened in their lives before they disappeared from them. For girls in northeastern Nigeria, years of Boko Haram insurgency have added another dimension to these barriers. Research examining the effects of the insurgency on girls' education has connected insecurity with attacks on schools, displacement, disrupted attendance, and reduced access to education (Joda & Abdulrasheed, 2015; Williams & Istifanus, 2017). The 2014 abduction of 276 girls from Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State, made this danger visible around the world. Yet Chibok was not an isolated event. UNICEF (2023) reported that between 2009 and 2022 approximately 2,295 teachers were killed, more than 19,000 were displaced, and over 1,500 schools were closed because of insecurity in northeastern Nigeria.

The consequences for girls extend beyond those who are directly attacked or abducted. Each attack creates fear among families who must decide whether sending a daughter to school is worth the possibility that she may not return. A parent who keeps a daughter home because of the threat of abduction is making a very different decision from my grandparents when they decided I had received enough education. Yet both situations reveal how forces outside a girl's control can determine whether she remains in the classroom. A school may; therefore, exist without being genuinely accessible. Its doors may be open, but if entering or remaining inside places a child in danger, access becomes almost meaningless. Insurgency also pushes families from their homes, separating

children from schools, teachers, communities, and familiar support systems. For a displaced girl, surviving the violence that forced her family to flee is only the beginning. The place where she seeks refuge may bring its own dangers.

Displaced, but Not Necessarily Safe

An internally displaced persons (IDP) camp is supposed to provide refuge. For girls who have fled insurgency, however, displacement does not always end vulnerability; sometimes it changes its form. Research with girls and young women living in an IDP camp in northeastern Nigeria shows how displacement can produce new vulnerabilities. Marlow et al. (2022) found that inadequate access to food, money, and other basic necessities could contribute to transactional sex and early or forced marriage. Their research also documented reproductive-health vulnerabilities among girls and young women living in displacement. More recent research focusing specifically on girls in Nigerian IDP camps further documents the problem of sexual violence. Oriola and Moen (2025) found that sexual violence affected not only girls' physical safety but also their sense of belonging and social well-being.

There is something particularly troubling about this cycle. A girl may flee her community because insurgency has made remaining there unsafe. She may lose her school in the process. Then, in the place where she is supposed to find protection, hunger, poverty, exploitation, and gendered vulnerability can expose her to new forms of harm. And once again, education is caught in the middle. It is difficult to speak meaningfully about a displaced girl's right to education without asking whether she has enough to eat, whether she is protected from sexual violence, whether she has been forced into marriage, and whether there is a functioning school she can safely attend. Humanitarian responses may categorize education, food security, child protection, and gender-based violence as different areas of intervention. In a girl's everyday life, however, these problems do not arrive separately. My own experiences were different, but this is where my childhood continues to shape the questions I ask. I know what it means for responsibilities and decisions made by adults to interrupt education. I eventually received another opportunity to return to school. A displaced girl confronting hunger, violence, marriage, and the loss of her community may never receive a second chance.

Beyond Access: Making Education Safe for Girls

If the barriers facing girls are interconnected, our responses to them cannot remain fragmented. Building schools and increasing enrollment matter, but neither is sufficient if the conditions surrounding girls continues to make learning unsafe or impossible. For girls affected by insurgency and displacement in Northern Nigeria, education must; therefore, be treated alongside protection. Safe and accessible learning spaces for displaced children are essential, but classrooms alone are not enough. Girls also need reliable access to food and basic necessities, protection from sexual and gender-based violence, and pathways back into education after displacement, marriage, pregnancy, or prolonged absence from school. Girls themselves must be included in conversations about what safety and meaningful educational access look like in their communities.

My education survived because I eventually received another chance. But a girl's right to education should not depend on whether she is unusually persistent, fortunate enough to find support, or eventually encounters someone willing to open another door. Public policy should create conditions in which extraordinary resilience is not a requirement for an ordinary right. When I think now about Buhari's "other room," I think beyond the literal kitchen or domestic space. I think about every boundary which tells a girl where she belongs and how far she is permitted to go. For some girls, that boundary is poverty or domestic labor. For others, it is marriage or the belief that educating a girl beyond a certain point is unnecessary. For girls living through insurgency in Northern Nigeria, the

boundary may be an unsafe road to school, an attacked classroom, displacement, or violence in the very place where they have sought refuge.

My journey taught me that education can change the direction of a girl's life, but it also taught me how easily that opportunity can be interrupted. I was fortunate enough to return to school after years away because I got a job and determined to get to the peak. Many girls will not have the luxury of waiting for another chance. Moving girls beyond "the other room," therefore, requires more than opening the school gate. It requires confronting the conditions that prevent them from reaching it in the first place and the dangers that may follow them after they enter. A meaningful right to education must mean that a girl can reach school safely, learn without carrying the burden of violence and exploitation, remain there with dignity, and imagine a future that has not already been decided for her.

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