



CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

## Promoting Gender Equality in Education, and Tackling Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

**Taibat Hussain**



**Nigeria is one of Africa's most populous countries with a population estimated by the United Nations to be approximately 225 million, composed of more than 250 ethnic groups. Despite provisions in the 1999 Nigerian Constitution enshrining gender equality and non-discrimination, the promotion and protection of women's rights in Nigeria, and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015 which prohibits all forms of violence against people in Nigeria, women continue to suffer injustices and marginalisation.**

Systemic gender inequalities are expressed in discriminatory laws which result in persistent and devastating violations of women's human rights, including denying them access to education and contributing to the disproportionate impact of poverty on women. Moreover, women suffer the most when it comes to gender-based violence. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reported that over three in 10 Nigerian girls experience physical violence by the age of 15. This situation requires urgent action by Nigerian States to domesticate and effectively enforce the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act to prevent and reduce gender-based violence and ensure that the needs of survivors of gender-based violence are adequately met.

Taibat Hussain is a Commonwealth Alumnus who completed a Master's degree in Development Economics at SOAS University of London in 2020 and has been instrumental in creating access to quality, safe education for children with particular focus on girls, and tackling gender-based violence through advocacy work conducted under her start-up, Rising Child Foundation. Taibat has also played a pivotal role in the empowerment and inclusion of women's collectives in policymaking, through the Partnership for Advancing Women in Economic Development project at the national level.



Taibat during a speaking engagement on the State of Girls Education in Abuja Nigeria.

**Taibat Hussain** was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 2019 to study for a Master's degree in Development Economics at SOAS University of London. She is the Founder and Executive Director of the Rising Child Foundation which has transformed and empowered the lives of the most vulnerable children, especially girls and young women, by creating access to education, promoting gender equality, and addressing gender-based violence. Through its advocacy work, Rising Child foundation influenced the passing of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act into a law and domestication in Kwara State of Nigeria in 2020. As the Senior Technical Advisor for the development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC) Taibat was instrumental in the implementation of the Partnership for Advancing Women in Economic Development (PAWED) project which created access for women to influence the Nigerian policies on gender and women's economic empowerment; and the Safe Schools project which created safe and conducive learning environments, particularly for girls and vulnerable students. She is a member of the Queen's Commonwealth Trust Network, a member of UNICEF's Generation Unlimited Young People's Action Team, and a member of UNESCO SDG4 Youth and Student Network. Currently, Taibat is pursuing her PhD studies in Global Development at the University of East Anglia on a Commonwealth Scholarship. Her research is on student experiences and institutional responses to school related gender-based violence. The findings from her PhD research will inform and improve the focus of her advocacy work with her start-up, Rising Child Foundation.

## Breaking and Blurring Boundaries to Access Education as a Girl Child

Growing up in a community with discriminatory gender norms and harmful practices that denied girls access to school and quality education, Taibat's future was already pre-determined by her community.

'I come from a community that places priority on the education of the male child over the female counterpart. Despite these gender and societal norms, my father recognized the transformative power of education and was resolute in sending me to school, defying expectations for a girl. The odd story of my early childhood made me develop a passion for education of the girl child which was what gave birth to the establishment of the Rising Child Foundation whose Executive Director is my humble self. Those barriers were what inspired and motivated me to give my best into my educational pursuit and lay a good example for others to follow.'

Prior to embarking on her Master's studies on a Commonwealth Scholarship, Taibat founded a start-up in 2017, the Rising Child Foundation. Their mission is to positively transform the lives of the most vulnerable children through education and empowerment, with a special focus on girls and young women. Alongside her developmental work through the start-up, Taibat also worked at a bank in Nigeria until such a time she decided to embark on her Master's studies to sharpen her knowledge and skills on issues affecting girls and young women to effectively contribute to the empowerment of women and girls. She also hoped to acquire knowledge to improve her start-up activities.

'One thing that's always been clear from my Master's studies is that I wanted to send a message that educating a girl child is never a waste. And I'm glad that the Commonwealth and SOAS believed that too when they nominated me. Because I am one lucky girl. But I want to provide opportunities to millions of other young girls. So, when I did my Master's degree it was all about wanting to understand what development issues impact my country, Nigeria, specifically, when it comes to girls and young women.'



Taibat graduation ceremony from SOAS University of London.

Moreover, Taibat also hoped that upon completing her Master's degree, she would use her newly acquired knowledge and skills to influence developmental policies in her country, Nigeria as she wrote in her Scholarship application letter:

'Upon completing my dissertation and Master's degree, I will have the knowledge and skills that will allow me to assess the best methodologies for developing participatory policies, identify forces and trends that make a policy more or less likely to be adopted and estimate the likely impact of intervention approaches.'

Following her Master's studies, Rising Child Foundation partnered with the Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative in 2022, and received financial support from the Urgent Action Fund to implement the 'Advocacy for Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in Nigeria' project which focused on reducing violence against girls and women in three Nigerian States: Kwara, Osun, and Niger. Some positive results have already been achieved in Kwara.

'In Kwara we were able to get the government to domesticate the VAPP Act... Because it is one thing to pass the law and another thing to ensure its enforcement.'

Alongside her developmental work with her start-up, Taibat took up several consulting assignments with the development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC). Notably, she worked as the Gender and Economic Development Consultant on the Partnership for Advancing Women in Economic Development (PAWED) project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) where she contributed to research and analysis aimed at improving women's economic empowerment in Nigeria.

Reflecting on her life before and after she was awarded the Commonwealth Scholarship, Taibat felt that the Scholarship was a life-changing opportunity she will always remember.

'I'm always proud to say that I am a Commonwealth Scholar because it's been one opportunity that's changed my life. My Scholarship experience has brought about significant achievements that have greatly impacted my career and nonprofit work. Foremost, among these achievements is the doors that having a Master's degree has opened for me. With my qualification from SOAS, I secured a consulting job where I was able to negotiate a seven-figure salary. This educational achievement not only enhanced my professional standing but also substantially improved my financial situation.'

While with dRPC, Taibat also provided technical support for the Safe Schools project that was funded by the Ford Foundation. The project focused on implementing initiatives to create safe and conducive learning environments, particularly for girls and vulnerable students.

Taibat is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of East Anglia where she is exploring the experiences and institutional responses to school related gender-based violence.

**'For my Master's, I was advocating for quality education, but for my PhD, I'm saying it's not just enough to have quality education, we must have quality, safe, inclusive, and transformative education. So, I think I'm building upon what I've learnt over the years, what I've learnt from my Master's to my PhD.'**

## Tackling Gender Based Violence in Nigeria and Beyond

Primary education is officially free and compulsory in Nigeria, yet, according to UNICEF, about 10.5 million children are not in school. Gender is an important factor in the pattern of educational marginalisation with girls making 60% of this number. There are many barriers that keep girls from accessing education such as child marriage, sexual violence, a patriarchal system and traditional preferences.

Having experienced these limitations herself, Taibat was determined to make a change through her Rising Child Foundation which she established in 2017. This youth-led non-governmental organisation in Nigeria focuses on creating access to education with a special focus on girls and young women as well as the empowerment of women-led community-based organisations to be agents of change within their communities. As part of this work, Taibat leads project outreaches aimed at promoting education, gender equality, and the eradication of gender-based violence. These projects involve community engagement, awareness campaigns, and capacity-building activities, all of which are designed to empower vulnerable groups and foster sustainable development.

**'Before the Scholarship I'd been doing a lot of developmental work but I don't think I gained the recognition until after the Master's qualification.'**

Following completion of her Master's degree, Taibat was determined to continue to be deeply involved in the activities of her non-profit organisation. The time of graduating from her Master's programme also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic which restricted her outreach activities, while it gave Taibat an opportunity to focus more on research and fact checking the news around COVID-19.

Reflecting on her time on Scholarship, Taibat spoke proudly of how she learned about the value of collaboration in supporting young innovators. Partnering with a local organisation, the Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, Taibat secured a grant in 2021 from the US Embassy to implement the 'Know Covid-19 Nigeria' project which focused on debunking misinformation by publishing reports on how COVID-19 was affecting the economy and young people, as well as how it was exacerbating gender-based violence.

**'I never really thought of myself as a researcher. But having gone through SOAS, and doing a lot of critical analysis, I felt this is one thing I could leverage. So, we did a lot about fact checking on news about the COVID-19.'**

In collaboration with a colleague from University College London that she met while on Scholarship, Taibat co-authored and published a paper entitled: Inequalities, COVID-19 and the Private Sector: The Nigerian Education System. It argued that low public spending on education since the 1980s and a higher-than-expected reliance on the private sector in some states, particularly evident in the south-east and south-west, has meant the education system is ill-equipped to deal with the COVID-19 crisis, leading to an increase in inequalities.



Taibat at the 2023 Global Youth Economic Summit in Washington DC.

After completing the project with Brain Builders, she successfully applied to Global Youth Mobilisation Fund for a grant to advocate against gender-based violence in Nigeria, this time as the main applicant. She highlighted that her Master's studies were instrumental in developing strong critical writing skills which helped her to secure this first official grant for her foundation.

**'I wouldn't compare my writing skills before the Master's to after the Master's studies. The difference is clear. I had to relearn how I write, or how I criticise research, and my critical analysis skills improved. The knowledge and connections I gained during my time at SOAS have been instrumental in my nonprofit endeavours. I have successfully secured grants totalling more than USD25,000 for my organisation. These financial resources have enabled us to expand our programs and reach a broader audience, making a more substantial impact in our mission to promote education and address gender-based violence.'**

The funding led to the successful implementation of the project, 'Stamp Out GBV in Kwara,' which educated young girls about their roles in curbing gender-based violence and trained them on how they could become advocates for other girls.

The project title is also a hashtag still in use for media advocacy, #StampOutGBV, and it has positively impacted more than 2 million Nigerians, both online and offline, through media advocacy (radio shows, print media, social media), market drives, community and school outreaches.

However, challenges and barriers were not uncommon in the implementation of this project, as Taibat and colleagues faced resistance in some communities.

**'Resistance to change, deeply entrenched gender norms, and initial scepticism in some communities were among the challenges we faced. However, these were overcome through persistent engagement and increased dialogue.'**



Taibat holding a placard during a GBV outreach in Kwara Nigeria.

Taibat proudly spoke of the impact of her foundation's work, which has resulted in more awareness of GBV in her local community and beyond.

**'I think for individuals is having the feeling of empowerment. Imagine those young girls that had the courage to speak out and speak up about how much they've experienced this [GBV].'**

## **Influencing the Domestication of the VAPP Act in Nigerian States**

The Advocacy for Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act is a law enacted by the National Assembly of Nigeria. However, there are still some Nigerian States that have not yet passed it in their state legislatures. Lack of domestication and effective implementation of this Act has resulted in offenders not being brought to justice, and lack of protection and effective remedies for victims of violence and abuse. Owing to its strength to protect human rights and reduce gender-based violence, the VAPP Act has attracted a lot of attention from concerned stakeholders over time, including the Rising Child Foundation.

To support and influence effective enforcement of the VAPP Act in Nigerian States to curb gender-based violence and human rights abuse, Taibat's NGO partnered with the Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative in 2022, with support from the Urgent Action Fund Africa to implement advocacy activities to create more engagement with the implementation of the VAPP Act, specifically targeting the Nigerian Osun and Kwara states where the VAPP Act had been domesticated but was not being enforced effectively.

**'For Kwara, we were able to get the government to domesticate the law because it's one thing to pass the law, and another to ensure its enforcement. A lot of times, the government just pass laws, and it's just redundant. What we did was to ensure that it [the VAPP Act] is being enforced. So, what we did was to work with enforcement, and all the stakeholders involved in the domestication of the Act. We [Rising Child Foundation] did a fact sheet and issued briefs to stakeholders to make them realise that this is an issue already.'**

Rising Child Foundation mobilised and brought together other key stakeholders to collectively influence action on the implementation of the provisions of the Act to prevent, reduce, and mitigate gender-based violence risks, and to respond to gender-based violence ensuring that the needs of survivors are adequately addressed. The stakeholders included the National Police Commission, the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Women's Affairs, Muslim organisations, churches, religious leaders and local NGOs such as Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative.



Taibat with her Team during a GBV outreach.

As part of this work, reported cases of gender-based violence were traced through agencies involved in tackling gender-based violence and followed through to ensure that cases were successfully settled, with victims receiving support. Moreover, advocacy efforts were also targeted towards raising awareness on gender-based violence in the communities of Niger, Osun, and Kwara who were empowered on their human rights and equipped on the knowledge on how to recognise what constitutes gender-based violence and appropriate channels to use to report cases.

**'We recognised that the VAPP Act is really timely and comprehensive. Because for a very long time there has been no law to provide punishment for wife battering, for example. And it's important to create awareness about it. So that people know, people can speak up, and we can see a lot of people coming out to speak [about GBV].'**

Through its advocacy activities, Rising Child Foundation and other stakeholders continue to push for the passage of the VAPP Act in Niger where it has not been domesticated yet.

**'We had to rally for the passage of the law with their [Niger] community, but because of the religious context of Niger state, it was difficult. So, all we could do is just train NGOs on the ground about what to do if there are any cases that are reported.'**



Taibat and her team of volunteers during a market outreach in Ilorin town.

Taibat identified the domestication of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act as the most significant change that she brought to her local community as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship.

'The most significant change in my community and beyond resulting from my scholarship has been the successful domestication of the VAPP (Violence Against Persons Prohibition) Act in my state. Before this change, my state had not implemented the VAPP Act despite its passage in 2015 at the national level. This gap in legislation left victims of gender-based violence (GBV) without adequate legal protection and support. Through intense advocacy efforts, including my active involvement as an activist, NGOs, and fellow advocates, we pressured the state government to pass the VAPP Act into law in 2020. This legislative change has been transformative, as it provides a legal framework to address and prevent GBV, ensuring that survivors have the legal recourse they need. Additionally, my work in mobilizing and empowering young people to champion the eradication of GBV has had a ripple effect. Many of these young advocates have carried out community outreach programs, providing education on GBV prevention and reporting. They have also served as mentors to school children, imparting knowledge about GBV prevention. The beneficiaries of these efforts include survivors of GBV, who now have legal protection and access to support services, as well as young advocates who have become change-makers in their communities.'

## Empowering Women in Nigeria to be Economically Independent

For a long time, women in Nigeria continue to face constraints when it comes to their economic empowerment, partly due to barriers imposed by gender discriminatory cultural practices and social norms, and lack of access to capital which have left some women poor and financially dependent on their male counterparts.



Taibat graduation ceremony from SOAS University of London.

To reverse these challenges, the development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC) partnered with South Saharan Social Development Organisation (SSDO) to form the Partnership for Advancing Women in Economic Development (PAWED) which was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The partnership aims at increasing advocacy on women's empowerment and influencing policymakers to increase funding and scale up investment in women's economic empowerment policies with particular focus on women's empowerment collectives (umbrella for organisations that are women-led and focused).

In 2021, Taibat joined dRPC, as a Gender and Economic Development Consultant, and she played a pivotal role in the implementation of the PAWED project.

**'I got the opportunity [to work for dRPC] because I had a Master's in Development Economics from SOAS. It's a leading NGO in Nigeria. When I met with the executive director, she was wowed by, of course, the way I presented myself, and the ideas I have for women's economic empowerment. And I was brought on the project.'**

As part of this project, Taibat supported the creation of a group of women's collective and their empowerment with skills to advocate to policy makers on the need to be more explicit about women's economic empowerment in the country.

**'We had about 200 women collectives. So, now in an organisation of different women groups, say maybe women in petroleum or women in agricultural associations, those were the ones that we fund and we supported to advocate. We provided them with resources, which are the fact sheets, issue briefs, and every other thing they need for their advocacy, and skills.'**

Taibat and colleagues also facilitated meetings between women's collectives and policy makers. Notably, women collectives had an opportunity to meet the Ministers of Women's Affairs and the Minister of Agriculture which led to the engagement of the women with policymakers in the co-creation of the new Nigeria's National Gender Policy of 2021-2026 and the National Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Policy.

**'We had PAWED representatives sit on the committee to co-create the new or devise the Nigerian Women's Economic Empowerment Policy. I think the benefit for the women's group was the opportunity for them to have their voice being heard. Their concerns need to be taken into consideration. And we're giving them the platform.'**

Moreover, Taibat used her research skills honed during her Scholarship to conduct background research on how to improve women's economic empowerment and presented reports to the committee for the (PAWED) project. Taibat

and colleagues also developed briefs and fact sheets that provided information to policy makers on challenges faced by women. This information together with the firsthand knowledge on the challenges that women are facing obtained from the women's collectives who met with the policy makers provided compelling evidence for policymakers to improve policies to support women.

**'Many times, I had to go back to my reading material, particularly those on the Growth and Development because I wanted to understand a concept. SOAS also provide me with an opportunity to develop my critical skills, I didn't have those skills [before the Scholarship]. And it was challenging at first because I had to learn how to be critical of things. And it's reflected in my writing and research. And I think it made me have a new thing to add to the work team.'**

## Improving Safety in Schools in Conflict and Violence-Affected Nigerian States

In conflict and violence-affected areas, schools are usually targeted by conflicting parties and converted to barracks, bases, detention facilities and to refugee camps for internally displaced persons.

This presents a threat to school premises and disruption by military operations which hinders access to education for children. Initiated by the Federal government of Nigeria in 2014, the Safe Schools Project focuses on supporting children affected by conflict and insecurity to continue their education. However, the scaling up of the project in Nigeria has been a struggle over the years due to limited funding. With funding that was provided by the Ford Foundation in 2021, dRPC extended the implementation of the Safe Schools Project to Niger republic and Nigeria, including Kano state.



A group photo of RCF GBV champions holding their certificate of participation.

While with dRPC, Taibat contributed to the Safe Schools Project. Through the project, they have trained 32 civil society organisations on the safe school activities, 92 schools and 550 school children trained on school safety. As part of this project, she worked with school principals to develop infrastructure that can withstand wars and violence.

Having appropriate infrastructure and trainings ensured that children in conflict and violence-affected areas continued to safely access education in schools.

‘One remarkable thing that I would say I did on that [Safe Schools Project] project was amplifying the work that the organisation is doing. I connected them [dRPC] with the Global Campaign for Education-US, which was an organisation that I got to know through my contacts from London.’

The dRPC became a member of the Global Campaign for Education-US coalition which has created more recognition and awareness of the contribution of dRPC on Safe Schools into the global agenda on education in emergencies.

Reflecting on the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarship, Taibat highlighted how her knowledge and skills honed while on Scholarship have changed her understanding and approach on tackling societal problems related to access to education and development. She identified **the most significant change to herself as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship.**

‘The most significant change resulting from my Scholarship experience has been a profound shift in my perspective on education advocacy. Before this transformative journey, I primarily focused on advocating for increased access to education. However, through the scholarship, I came to realise that mere access is insufficient. What truly matters is safe, inclusive, and transformative education. Previously, I emphasised the importance of getting children, especially girls, into classrooms. While this was undoubtedly crucial, it didn’t fully address the deeper issues. After this realisation, I became a passionate advocate for the need to prioritise safe and inclusive education environments that are free from gender-based violence (GBV). I began writing extensively on this topic, speaking at both national and international conferences to highlight the urgency of addressing GBV in schools and allocating sufficient financial resources to ensure its eradication.’

Taibat also spoke proudly of the value of the networks and connections she developed while on Scholarship.

‘Beyond the academic and financial gains, my Scholarship experience has enriched my personal life. I have forged lasting friendships with fellow scholars through a WhatsApp group I have with fellow CSC scholar. These friendships have not only provided a strong support network but also fostered a sense of shared purpose. A Commonwealth Scholar signposted me to a grant funding application information, that I would not necessarily have access to, that just shows the extent of community and solidarity among Commonwealth Alumni. I’ve coauthored with other SOAS friends and published papers. It’s just amazing how leaving my comfort zone to go to another place could just transform my life.’

Looking ahead, Taibat hopes to complete her PhD research where she is investigating students’ experiences and institutional responses to school related gender-based violence. She intends to use the findings from her research to inform and guide her advocacy work on GBV.

‘My PhD is influenced by my advocacy work. I want my research findings to influence my advocacy on gender-based violence in schools in my community. Whatever findings from my research, I want them to go into practice and to influence public policy makers to bring about interventions or measures to address gender-based violence.’

### More about Taibat Hussain

Find out more by visiting the website of Rising Child Foundation that can be accessed here:

<https://therisingchildfoundation.org.ng/>

Read Taibat’s blogs by visiting this link:

<https://www.generationunlimited.org/stories/taibat-hussain-tackling-school-related-gender-based-violence-essential-transforming>

Access additional published work here:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355209158\\_Inequalities\\_COVID-19\\_and\\_the\\_Private\\_Sector\\_The\\_Nigerian\\_Education\\_System](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355209158_Inequalities_COVID-19_and_the_Private_Sector_The_Nigerian_Education_System)

### Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK

Woburn House

20-24 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HF

Email: [evaluation@cscuk.org.uk](mailto:evaluation@cscuk.org.uk)

Website: [bit.ly/cscuk-evaluation](http://bit.ly/cscuk-evaluation)

