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A Framework of 'Epistemicide': Contrasting Malala's Philosophy of Educational Empowerment with the Taliban's Systematic Destruction of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the profound ideological confrontation between the worldwide campaign for girls' education by Malala Yousafzai and the Taliban's systematic scourge against the intellectual lives of women through the prism of epistemicide, the systematic annihilation of knowledge regimes. I employ a blend of postcolonial theory, feminist philosophy, and human rights scholarship to suggest that the Taliban is not just a set of repressive regulations. Their policies are a calculated assault on a complete mode of knowing and being among women to abolish their critical and independent thinking, their ability to act without dependence, and to preserve their historical memory. Against this backdrop, the continued work of Malala Yousafzai is, to me, an exemplar of epistemic justice in real life. I place her activism as a counter-philosophy that is needed to reclaim education as a liberation tool useful in enabling people to think critically and contribute to creating a more peaceful society. Comparing both pieces of evidence, Afghanistan and Pakistan, I demonstrate that the struggle to educate girls is not about a normal policy discussion. It reveals the conflict as the struggle concerning the most basic human right, the right to know, to speak, and to live as completely autonomous, intellectually capable human beings.

Keywords: Epistemicide, Malala Yousafzai, Taliban, female education, epistemic justice, knowledge destruction, gender apartheid, Pakistan, Afghanistan

INTRODUCTION

Beyond Policy Differences to Crimes Against Knowledge

It was not just an assassination on a young activist, because when the Taliban gunmen shot 15-year-old Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani girl, as she was riding home to school in Swat Valley, Pakistan, on October 9, 2012 (Choudhary, 2016). It pointed to an underlying ideological conflict over knowledge, human potential and right to intellectual existence. Most news media cast it as a human-rights infringement and struggle to obtain access to education, but a theoretical approach reveals a more malevolent trend: a structural campaign of epistemicide, i.e. the systematic annihilation of a knowledge

system and the people who inhabit it (Diaz, 2013).

This paper employs epistemicide as the primary spectacle in analyzing the Taliban war on female education by arguing that it is not a sequence of unfortunate policies but a well-planned program to wipe out female intellectual life in the society. The research question is;

How it is possible to perceive the Taliban policies on women education as a conscious instance of epistemicide and what is the major philosophical and practical remedy of Malala as her advocate?

Malala Yousafzai survived the shooting and was the youngest recipient of Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 at the age of 17 (Ikrama & Qumer, 2023). She is currently the loudest voice opposed to this epistemicide. Not only her autobiography, *I Am Malala*, the Malala Fund that she co-founded with Shiza in 2013, or her continuous activism, but a holistic counterphilosophy of epistemic justice, is her direct challenge and rejection of the Taliban ideology at every tier (Gregorian, 2018). This paper shifts the debate by presenting the conflict in the context of epistemicide to an appreciation of crimes committed against human civilization itself.

Theoretical Framework: How to define Epistemicide and Epistemic Justice

Epistemicide: the Loss of Knowledge Systems

The term epistemicide dates back to postcolonial criticism, particularly in the writings of Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who had coined the term to refer to the act of killing knowledge systems that dominant epistemic systems (often western colonial powers) commit against an indigenous and non-Western knowledge(s) (Phiri, 2024). According to Moradi (2025), it includes institutionalized undermining, shutting down, and destruction of complete knowledge systems and communities. It is a military and epistemological process aimed at asserting the dominance of one body of knowledge over the others and obliterating the opposing ones.

The concept has been primarily applied to examine how colonial powers erased the knowledge of indigenous communities by practicing epistemic racism/sexism (Kubota, 2020), in which racial and gendered dominance dictate the knowledge that is acceptable. According to Lwanda (2024), colonial undertakes typically considered rival knowledges to be non-scientific, expendable, and the result was an enormous epistemicide that was not only focused on knowledge itself but also on physical infrastructure (libraries, universities), individuals who held knowledge (scholars, teachers, elders) and social organization that facilitated the transmission of knowledge (Kapatika, 2022).

However, this framework is mostly applied in colonial settings, in this paper the Taliban campaign against female education is considered to analyze using the framework. The comparison is evident: the Taliban, like colonialists, aims not only at limiting but eliminating an entire epistemic community of women and girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan to be able to undertake any knowledge production, transmission and innovation. The campaign meets all the epistemicide requirements: knowledge systems and carriers of knowledge are systematically destroyed, and the purpose is to render a way of knowing impossible to the future generations.

Epistemic Justice: Repairing Stifled Systems of Knowledge

The reverse of epistemicide is known as epistemic justice - trying to redeem,

authenticate and empower repressed forms of knowledge and the people who possess it. Borrowing the concept of epistemic injustice by Bufkin (2024), epistemic justice aims at redressing testimonial injustice (the inability of the speaker to be credible due to prejudice) and hermeneutical injustice (the inability of marginalized groups to use conceptual means to help make sense of their experiences). The resistant imaginations, which in his opinion, is the only epistemic justice should be to be actively resistant to hegemonic bodies of knowledge.

According to the recent scholars, epistemic justice is closely connected with gender and education. According to Picardi, Addabbo, and Cois (2023), it should be at the heart of true gender equality in schools because epistemic exchanges are at the centre of the daily academic interactions. Cummings et al. (2023) demonstrate that epistemic justice models can decolonize the knowledge practices of sustainable development with the point that it is necessary to address the related epistemic asymmetries and the fact that historically marginalized voices must be reinstated.

The epistemic justice provides a strong prism to applied to Malala. Her movement is one of reinstating the right of Afghan and Pakistani women to be considered legitimate knowers, individuals whose testimony is to be taken seriously, whose intellectual property is to be appreciated and their epistemic authority is to be honored. In all aspects, the philosophy of Malala is a direct opposition to the epistemicide of the Taliban, as she offers a different concept of knowledge, education, and human dignity.

The Campaign of Epistemicide of the Taliban: The Female-Knowledge Destroying System History: Trends of Educational Destruction

In order to regard the present-day epistemicide of the Taliban as systematic, one can refer to the past. The history of women education in Afghanistan has had a dramatic improvement and the reverse. The nation achieved significant improvements under the reign of King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) who founded special girls schools (Yazdani, 2020). The first Taliban regime (1996 -2001) had an undeniable epistemicide. Education and employment of women was prohibited making Afghanistan a country where the intellectual participation of women would be a criminal offense (Paulo, 2021). Following the Taliban governmental overthrow in 2001, education has begun to revive in Afghanistan: 3,816,793 girls were attending grades 1-12 in all provinces between 2002-2021 (Danish, 2025). The 2020 ministry of education report showed that 18,765 state and non-state schools were in operation, there were more than 200,000 teachers out of which 80,554 were women and more than 100,000 women were attending universities (Javaid, 2024).

In August of 2021, with the resurgence of the Taliban, epistemicide was resumed immediately and on a massive scale. In a month they suspended girls in secondary schools, withdrawing all the policies including 2019 Girls Education Policy (Ahmadi, 2024). In December 2022, university education became also banned, and at this point, Afghanistan is the only nation, where girls do not have the right to continue their education after sixth grade (Ahmadi, 2024). This tendency indicates that epistemicide does not exist as reactive but is the focus of commitment to ideology.

Epistemicide: Architecture: Multi-Layered Destruction

The epistemicide of the Taliban intends to use various mechanisms as sources of

reinforcement to render the existence of female intellects unfeasible.

Education Access: Total Prohibition

The most obvious aspect is the complete prohibition of female education in other than elementary levels. Approximately 2.2 million Afghan girls are also not allowed to attend school after their primary grades (Iqbal, Liang, & Alam, 2025). In case the ban is not lifted, UNESCO estimates that by 2030, there will be over 4 million girls out of school. The Taliban also employed such tactics in the Swat Valley of Pakistan where Malala started her activism when they brought over 400 schools under the Taliban insurgency attacks.

This prohibition is total and at once--when a girl is about 12 years of age or has completed sixth grade, the formal schooling of this girl comes to an abrupt end. It has no exceptions, no other ways, no compromises. This totality is an indicator of the intent of epistemicide: it is not about restricting or regulating, but destroying the education of girls completely.

Academic Credentialing: The Practice of Retroactive Erasure of Scholarly Contributions

Worse still, the Taliban has launched a retroactive attack on the women who have already acquired an education prior to 2021. The government has prohibited the issue of academic transcripts and certificates to women, in effect scaling the records of achievements in the past and rendering qualification meaningless. What a perfect epistemicide this action demonstrates: not only the future intellectual growth should be prevented, but past successes also have to be disestablished, as though they were never made at all.

Curricular Control: Restricting What Can Be Known

The epistemicide practiced by the Taliban resembles the college administration that banned women the opportunity to major in subjects that are considered too hard to be done by girls. The source says that they prevent women to pursue such majors as civil engineering or journalism because they are too difficult. It appears to be a concession on the surface such as allowing women to study nursing but not engineering but that is not the real issue. Epistemicide is not about who is allowed to study and not the matter of a range of knowledge that a group is allowed to know whether it is accessible or not. Taliban is implying that women cannot enter into some disciplines, essentially that the minds of women are limited by default.

The policy of the Taliban is not just a matter of words on the physical side. They destroyed more than 400 schools during the Swat valley insurgency destroying the physical space that the girls required to learn (Hussain & Alam, 2024). Not merely a tactic, that is making a statement that girls' schools are taboo. And rather than attending these secular schools, they move on to madrasahs, where they are indoctrinated as opposed to thinking critically. It is not only to lock-out girls but rather to make sure that should they receive any education, it is geared to strengthen patriarchal dominance.

Other critics believe that we are making too much of it and it is extreme conservatism but not literal epistemicide. The distinction is that of intentionality, breadth, and end goal. This was not accidental on the part of the Taliban, but they planned it out and made female education look like a corruption and a threat. Their policies touch upon all the female intellectual life areas such as the prohibition of degrees to the deprivation

of economic resources. The end goal is not to provide the women with a proper education but destroy girl-knowing. What follows are an arrangement in which women may be knowledgeable, but they lack the social arena to represent, implement, or transfer said knowledge - that is, epistemicide.

That is all in contrast with the philosophy of epistemic justice that Malala Yousafzai has. She views education as an instrument of freedom rather than a menace. She stated in her UN address in 2013, as follows: One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world (Westman, 2015). That makes the emphasis on knowledge as an instrument of change, rather than subversion. She appeals to the core of epistemic resistance by pointing out that the Taliban can seize books, but cannot prevent people from thinking (Yousafzai, 2024).

Malala also reverses the religious rationale of the Taliban as she points out the support of learning in Islam. She notes that the very first command of the Quran is Iqra (to read), and hence Islam is a religion of the study. In the statement she makes, Islam is a religion of peace, humanity and brotherhood... it is the responsibility of every child to receive education, she puts the religious rhetoric of the Taliban to a confrontation with their policy. Her delivery of the approach demonstrates that women education is not a Western message but an Islamic command.

Outside theory, the holistic argument provided by Malala connects to tangible benefits in the form of stronger economies, improved public health, climate response, and less conflict. These allegations are based directly on fact and research and cover all the areas that Taliban believes to be threatening. She demonstrates how woman education can be the driver of prosperity and thus this makes the Taliban adapt their views to factual evidence that their policies are self-destructive.

Personal epistemic justice is evidenced in her autobiography, *I Am Malala* (2013). It provides her with a platform to establish credibility and offer an account that can be used by other people to comprehend how they too are being oppressed. The impact of the book, which has been translated into dozens of languages and is studied all over the world, demonstrates that testimony could become an effective instrument of epistemic justice at the international level.

Lastly, Malala Fund realizes her vision by empowering the local activists of education rather than implementing top-down solutions. The fund supports hermeneutical injustice through funding 57 advocates in eight countries, thereby developing local skills. Even when formal systems fail, their places of holding knowledge known as secret schools and online platforms keep the transmission of knowledge safe to girls. This is a grassroots defense of epistemic justice indicating that knowledge does not have to die out even in harsh conditions.

Comparative Analysis: A Dichotomy of Philosophies

To demonstrate the immense ideological divide between the Taliban's epistemicide and Malala's epistemic justice, in this part of the paper we do a straight-up comparison of five key themes that we deem important the most.

Purpose of Education

Malala's View: Education is what gives power, educates people to think on their own, peace, boosts economies, they reach their full potential. It's transformative - it's changing

people and entire societies because it allows us to imagine, understand and do more.

Taliban's View: Education is a tool for indoctrination, control and to keep "un-Islamic" ideas out. It shuts women off from agency (see the original documents). They perceive it as dangerous as it may allow women to question the patriarchy.

These two worldviews have a head-on clash. Malala believes that knowledge increases freedom, but the Taliban believes that certain knowledge is threatening order and needs to be shut down. They are really in conflict with each other because knowledge is either the force for good or it is the force for destruction, and we can't really combine these two concepts - one will prevail over the other.

Role of Women and Girls

Malala's View: Women are equal teammates, leaders, change-makers and dreaming, ambitious people (Yousafzai, 2014; Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013). She views women as fully human with a right to know and do.

Taliban's View: Women are to be kept in seclusion, doing household chores, and out of the open, subservient to men. They deny women any proper public voice and agency. The Taliban's epistemicide is based on the belief that women are not full persons with a right to a voice. Without 'full personhood' - they say women's knowledge is invalid. Malala's vision insists that women are complete people whose knowing is important.

Access to Knowledge

Malala's Perspective: Education is a universal human right, all people should have a minimum of 12 years of free, safe, quality education (Malala Fund framework). This brings access to be a matter of basic dignity.

Taliban's Interpretation: Girls are not allowed to attend classes after Grades 6; specific faculties are closed; education is delivered via unfair grading system. This makes female knowledge a conditional privilege which can be lost.

The conflict between rights and perks is what epistemicide is all about. Rights cannot legally be taken away, whereas perks are revoked at will. The system of the Taliban states that girl-education is a privilege in the hands of men, which is why epistemicide makes sense according to their system of values.

View of Islamic Texts

Malala's View: Quran is a source of hope, mercy and learning as highlighted in the command "Iqra" (Read) (Yousafzai, 2014). Islam has made learning a duty and a responsibility.

Taliban's View: They claim that the Quran condones misogyny, violence and stifles knowledge (though Malala claims that this is a deliberate misreading of the Quran, original documents)

This theological fight determines whether the Taliban's epistemicide can have religious legitimacy. If the Taliban is on the floor, their epistemicide resembles orthodox Islam. Malala counters that just because what their reading says is not right, denying female knowledge is not a true expression of Islam.

Tools of Change

Malala's Opinion: "Books and pens," dialogue, cooperation, voice, and learning are "most powerful weapons" (Yousafzai, 2013). Change comes through persuasion, education and empowerment.

Taliban's View: Weapons are guns, edicts, violence, intimidation, censorship and outright tearing down of schools. Change goes through forcing and erasing.

This contrast informs us of the need for physical force by the Taliban. Even if they could murder all the real talk, knowledge never really goes away- it simply hides till it is seen again. So they use the weapon of physical violence to drown it, whereas Malala uses the weapons of knowledge and voice.

Implications Why the Epistemicide Framework is Important

Elevating the Moral Stakes

Calling the Taliban's policies "epistemicide" rather than "policy restrictions" represents a flip of the moral game. Epistemicide is a crime against human civilization -- it's on par with genocide, linguistic wipe out, cultural destruction.

When the world views these moves as epistemicide they know that more is at stake than not schooling, rather the entire system of knowledge constructed by half the population is under threat.

In Jan 2025, the prosecutor for the International Criminal Court (ICC) requested arrest warrants for two Taliban leaders - Haibatullah Akhundzada and chief justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani - charging them with "criminally responsible for persecuting Afghan girls and women" (Belousova & Sharma, 2025). That was the first official recognition of gender apartheid as a crime against humanity. Recognizing epistemicide would carry accountability even higher up: it would denote the crime in specific: the organized destruction of female knowledge systems.

Resistances: Clarity Strategy

The resistance also acquires a more pointed direction, which is the epistemicide. If the Taliban are limiting options justly, it will likely be a matter of policy tweaks to fix. But if they're waging an epistemic assault, the counter - strategy has to be that strong too. This is what Malala's approach does exactly. She is not just yelling for more schools, however; she's attacking the entire basis of the Taliban's view of the world. Facing epistemicide calls for "knowledge democracy" - giving every knowledge system equal standing. Applied to the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan, that means not only restoring the schooling of girls, but restructuring society so that female knowledge is equally legit as male knowledge. Anything less and the epistemicide basis is left untouched.

Intersectional Dimensions

The struggle against women's epistemicide in Afghanistan and Pakistan is intersecting with racism, classism and geographic oppression. Taliban rule pains minorities, rural peoples and low- income families the most (Javadi, 2025). This intersectionality reveals that epistemicide is not an 'and everything fits into one categorisation'; it is a 'matrix of domination'.

Malala's work is indicative of that complexity. The Malala Fund operates in a number of countries where multiple forms of educational marginalization are encountered, because epistemicide has different forms in different settings. An intersectional epistemicide framework says that enacting epistemic justice means tacking gender, race, class and place all together.

Global Implications

Although we look at Afghanistan and Pakistan, the epistemicide idea carries across

the world. Wherever you see a systematic campaign for denying a group knowledge creation, spread or authority, epistemicide could be at play. This includes the current debates around decolonizing the curriculum, protecting indigenous knowledge and calling for global educational equity.

Malala herself has taken her advocacy to a global level preaching that education is a universal right. Her work as UN Peace Messenger (appointed 2017) as well as her work across the globe demonstrates that epistemic justice is a global pressing need, not merely a regional issue.

CONCLUSION: The Battle for Epistemic Justice Is Not Yet Over

This paper argues that Taliban policies on female education equal epistemicide - a deliberate and all-embracing campaign to wipe out female intellectual life from Afghanistan and Pakistan. It's not just hype, it's a spot-on description of sanctions that prohibit schooling, delete certifications, slash disciplines and destroy infrastructure and rationalize it with perverse religious rhetoric. The campaign goes so deep that it attempts to destroy every avenue in which women are able to generate, transmit or inherit knowledge.

In response, Malala Yousafzai constructed an entire counter philosophy of epistemic justice which rejects each of the Taliban premises. She recovers education as liberation, unravels the true use of religion, showcases the holistic payoffs of learning, uses her own story as credibility and constructs institutions that implement epistemic justice for real. The contrast between these visions is absolute - they can't meet in the middle. Whereas the former sees the fact of female knowledge as something to be feared, the latter sees it as a necessary condition for the flourishing of humanity.

By 2025 the conflict is still on. Afghanistan remains the only one nation, which prohibits girls from studying secondary and university, 2.2 million girls are out of school and the number is increasing. Resistance continues to live on the fringes. Secret classes continue to erupt all over Afghanistan. The Malala Fund supports 57 local education activists. Afghan women themselves keep fighting. 40 women surveyed in 2025, women in Afghanistan, are determined to study despite the ban. As one girl put it, "The Taliban can close our schools but cannot close our minds."

The epistemicide framework helps us to know what's really high stakes. This is not a policy debate which is amenable to a simple compromise between reasonable people. It's a civilization - level war over whether half the human population gets to know, think, speak and stand as full intellectual beings. If epistemicide is effective, it is not merely effective in the present, but has changed the future's possibilities for generations to come. Children born under this system would find a world in which female knowing is unthinkable, all fields of knowledge were male only and male authority over knowledge was a permanent monopoly.

Opposite to that is Malala's vision of epistemic justice - a world in which schooling is a right for all, diverse voices make communities stronger instead of threatening, learning frees instead of oppresses. The philosophy it is rooted in, both Islamic and universal human rights, provides the blueprint for those societies desiring genuine justice. But the map is not merely a theoretical construct - it needs political will, international

backing, and continued struggle.

The world is at a clear fork. We can continue to treat Taliban moves as aberrations of policy and negotiation as if the problem can be tolerated as a domestic issue. Or we can recognize these policies as crimes against knowledge, crimes for which the world should react and act together, in the same way as it responds to genocide or ethnic cleansing.

The ICC move to tax Taliban leaders for gender persecution in 2025 is a critical first step. But epistemicide requires us to explicitly name it as a crime, to establish international legal precedents to keep knowledge safe before its bearers, and to organize long-term educational resistance. If we see that destroying schools, wiping certificates and banning women's intellectual life is more than violating a right - it's committing epistemicide - the call for justice gets even louder.

While epistemicide may appear to be a disaster, Malala Yousafzai shows how it is not necessarily an absolute or irreparable tragedy. Knowledge once made sticks around - in heads and memories and the stubbornness of determination of those who push back. As she put it to the United Nations, "The terrorists thought they'd stop my aims and ambitions, but nothing changed except that weakness, fear and hopelessness died." Strength, power and courage was born" (Yousafzai, 2013). That line sums up what epistemic resistance is all about - that knowing survives even when there is oppression.

Thus the battle of epistemicide against epistemic justice rages on. Taliban wage a waged war against female knowledge. Malala fights back-through education, advocacy and structural change. Who wins will determine not just the schooling of girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but the future of the human knowledge on the planet. If epistemicide wins today, then the footings of progress could collapse everywhere in the next century.

This paper shows that the epistemicide framework is more than an academic exercise - it's a moral and strategic necessity. It nails the definition of the crime and points out the thoroughness of the campaign, and what real resistance requires. It makes Malala's activism inspirational, not just inspirational, but also essential. And it makes us, those who appreciate knowledge, freedom and dignity to see that the struggle for Afghan girls' education is, actually, a struggle for all of us, for the unalienable right to know, to learn and to add to the world's knowledge. Let us pick up our books and our pens. They are the most powerful weapons that we have. Give one kid, one teacher, one book and one pen, and you can change the world." (Yousafzai, 2013). She brings the light of epistemic justice in the darkness of epistemicide.

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Appendix: Table of Epistemological Contrasts

Table 1: A Dichotomy of Educational Philosophies: Malala Yousafzai vs. The Taliban

Thematic Dimension	Malala's Epistemic Justice Philosophy	Taliban's Epistemicide Campaign
Fundamental Purpose of Education	Liberation through critical thinking; empowerment for individual and collective transformation; foundation for peace and prosperity	Ideological control through indoctrination; prevention of critical thought that might challenge patriarchal authority; elimination of female agency
Ontological Status of Women	Full human persons with equal dignity, legitimate epistemic authority, and right to public voice; agents of social change and leaders	Subordinate beings requiring male guardianship; no legitimate public voice or authority; existence confined to domestic sphere (<i>purdah</i>)
Knowledge Access Rights	Universal human right requiring minimum 12 years of free, safe, quality education; access to all domains of knowledge without gender restrictions	Conditional male-granted privilege; systematic prohibition past grade 6; specific disciplines banned as "too difficult for women"; retroactive erasure of credentials
Theological Framework	Islam as religion of knowledge (<i>Iqra</i> —Read); education as religious duty and responsibility; faith as source of enlightenment and peace	Distorted interpretation positioning female knowledge as un-Islamic; religious texts weaponized to justify misogyny and violence; faith as tool of oppression
Instruments of Change	"Books and pens" as most powerful weapons; dialogue, persuasion, and knowledge as transformative forces; non-violent resistance through education	Guns, edicts, and physical violence; intimidation and censorship; bombing of schools; coercion rather than persuasion
Epistemological Assumption	Knowledge expands human capacity and freedom; diverse perspectives strengthen societies; female knowing enriches collective knowledge	Certain knowledge threatens patriarchal order; female knowing destabilizes society; knowledge must be controlled and gendered; female intellectual

		participation is inherently dangerous
Vision of Future Society	Prosperous, healthy, peaceful communities strengthened by full participation of all citizens regardless of gender; educational attainment as foundation for development	Patriarchal society with permanent female subordination; male monopoly on epistemic authority and public knowledge production; epistemically segregated society
Relationship to Modernity	Selective engagement embracing educational access, technology, and human rights while maintaining cultural and religious identity	Wholesale rejection of modernity perceived as Western and corrupting; return to imagined past with rigid gender segregation
Economic Philosophy	Female education as economic multiplier benefiting entire society; educated women drive GDP growth, reduce poverty, improve health outcomes	Acceptance of economic devastation (2.5% GDP loss) as price for maintaining gender hierarchy; patriarchal ideology prioritized over economic pragmatism
Response to Resistance	Amplification of suppressed voices; creation of platforms for marginalized knowers; institutional support for local education activists	Violent suppression; assassination attempts against advocates; criminalization of education provision; physical destruction of learning spaces