Gender Mainstreaming in Learning for Sustainable Development
“Learning is the act of acquiring new, or modifying and reinforcing, existing knowledge, behaviors, skills, values, or preferences … It does not happen all at once, but builds upon and is shaped by previous knowledge. To that end, learning may be viewed as a process, rather than a collection of factual and procedural knowledge …”

(Daniel L. Schacter, Daniel T. Gilbert and Daniel M. Wegner (2011, p. 264))

INTRODUCTION

Learning is not only the key to individual freedom, it also brings empowerment. Once people are empowered, they can make both choices and decisions, which increases their ability to act and to influence their lives and environment. Learning for sustainable development, as defined by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), is a process that aims to bring about empowerment through learning in both formal and non-formal settings.

Sustainable development has three key facets: equity and social inclusion (all members of a society, regardless of gender, race or income, have access to quality learning opportunities and can direct their own development); economic empowerment (people have not only the knowledge and skills but also the opportunities for gainful employment and entrepreneurship); and ensuring environmental protection (social and economic development do not destroy natural resources). Learning is a key tool in achieving sustainable development. COL’s work mainly addresses two of those facets: equity and economic empowerment.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen considers “development as freedom” and describes it as “the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value.” Sustainable development is about expanding people’s options while protecting the potential of future generations to enjoy similar freedoms. One of those freedoms must be equal access to learning opportunities for all girls/women and boys/men.

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy and process for ensuring that both sexes participate equally in decision-making and access resources, opportunities and benefits of social and economic development. Its purpose is to achieve gender equality, which is essential for the creation of healthy and sustainable societies, a key priority in the 2013 Commonwealth Charter. From a learning perspective, this is achievable through various means, including the use of technologies and open and distance learning (ODL). ODL provides marginalised populations — irrespective of gender, age, ethnicity, location or education — with an “equalising opportunity” to tap into formal and informal learning (a self-motivated, intrinsic process of acquiring knowledge, values and skills) as opposed to formal education (the passive process of imparting knowledge, values and skills to an individual through an external source). ODL therefore offers all members of a community a chance to enrol in learning programmes to not only acquire the knowledge and skills they need to live a healthy and productive life, but also be active participants in their community, contributing to its long-term development.

WHY MAINSTREAM GENDER IN LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

ODL is especially beneficial for girls/women. They have historically experienced and continue to experience gender discrimination, facing more socio-economic challenges and cultural constraints than boys/men. The global trend is for girls/women to be less included and less involved in all stages of the development process, and to benefit less from the positive results of development. Many continue to live in exclusion and poverty. ODL is often viewed as a way to provide girls/women with the freedom to access educational opportunities while fulfilling other, often family-focused, responsibilities, which are often seen as primarily a girl’s/woman’s responsibility. Institutions using ODL methods must ensure that their policies, delivery processes, and learning tools and content encourage both female and male learners to think, and consequently act,

Gender roles and attitudes are dynamic, so they can and do change.
societies are generally reflected within the cultures of their organisations, including ODL institutions. Yet, learning institutions can be effective tools of change and have a lasting impact on gender relations. ODL institutions can support girls/women as both learners and leaders.

If gender equality is integrated in the vision, mission, goals and objectives of an ODL institution, both girls'/women's and boys'/men's views, interests and needs will help shape organisational policies, processes and programmes and ensure that gender equality becomes part of the organisational culture. Both sexes will be better represented and their socio-economic needs better met:

- as leaders and managers;
- as educators and role models; and
- as learners, receiving better access to learning and life skills that are relevant to their lives.

Both sexes will be better able to exercise their capabilities to influence their own lives.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING: A TOOL FOR LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Learning opportunities are the drivers of social change and economic growth. Gender mainstreaming is one vehicle for
ensuring equitable access to these learning opportunities. It is the essential tool for achieving gender equality, which
in turn facilitates the achievement of sustainable development. ODL institutions can initiate gender-responsive learn-
ing through a two-pronged approach: by establishing an organisational culture that promotes gender equality, and
by identifying and addressing the barriers to learning for both girls/women and boys/men. Gender mainstreaming equalises:
• the possibility for expansion of capabilities of both girls/women and boys/men,
• access to resources and voice, and
• the opportunity to be change agents.
   It addresses systemic and structural gender discrimina-
tion and helps to remove the obstacles preventing full en-
joyment of one’s freedoms.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS TO GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Gender mainstreaming as a globally accepted strategy to
achieve gender equality was first introduced by the Beijing
Platform of Action (1995), followed by several United Na-
tions (UN) and Commonwealth policy frameworks, notably
the UN Economic and Social Council (EcoSoc) resolution
of 1997/2. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
2000–2015 provided concrete, globally accepted indicators
for gender mainstreaming, with a focus on education and
health, and one goal specifically devoted to gender equal-
ity. The Education for All (EFA) movement achieved global
consensus on gender mainstreaming in education. In Janu-
ary 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were
announced.

   International, regional and national commitments to
gender mainstreaming have grown from global recogni-
tion that women’s empowerment and gender equality are key
to sustainable development. In the post-2015 global devel-
opment agenda, the international community is calling for
equity and inclusion, an emphasis on quality and a shift
towards Lifelong Learning.

   SDG 4 is “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality educa-
tion and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”; 
Target 4.1 is “by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete 
free, equitable and quality primary and secondary educa-
tion leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.”
SDG 5 is “Achieve gender equality and empower all women
and girls.”

   However, providing access to learning is not enough. 
There must be quality learning that delivers positive out-
comes for girls/women and boys/men. Greater gender
equality can improve development outcomes such as
improved health and economic growth; and removing barriers that prevent women from having the same access as men to resources, rights and economic opportunities can contribute to a healthy economy.

WHERE ARE THE GENDER GAPS?

- Of the world’s 1 billion poorest people, three-fifths are girls/women.
- When unpaid [domestic] work is taken into account, women’s total work hours are longer than men’s in all regions.
- Two-thirds of the illiterate people in the world are girls/women.
- 89 girls complete primary school for every 100 boys who complete primary school.
- The most recent data available show that of 59.3 million out-of-school children of primary school age, 31 million are girls.
- Girls drop out of formal schooling … because of poverty, early marriage, gender-based violence, cultural practices and a lack of resources, among other challenges.
- Social perceptions that girls have less economic value than boys can dissuade families from keeping girls in school.
- Women hold just 21% of the Commonwealth’s parliamentary seats.

GENDER: The social and constructed differences in girls’/women’s and boys’/men’s roles and responsibilities, which are learned and vary between cultures. Gender roles are therefore dynamic and can change over time. Cultural notions of masculinity and femininity learned through socialisation have resulted in different assumptions and expectations about girls’/women’s and boys’/men’s behaviour, characteristics, capabilities, aptitudes and division of labour. This has been accompanied by different opportunities and control over access to resources and benefits for the girls/women and boys/men. (Adapted from UNESCO, 2009)

GENDER EQUALITY: Gender equality relates to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of girls/women and boys/men. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same, but that individuals’ rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both men and women are taken into consideration, recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development. (Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–2015)

GENDER-RESPONSIVENESS: Being responsive to the needs of boys and men, as well as girls and women, and actively trying to bring about more equitable gender relations or correct gender imbalances in a given context.
IMPLICATIONS OF NOT ADDRESSING THE GENDER GAPS

Learning and education are universal human entitlements that have significant benefits for one’s well-being and should not depend on individual circumstances. From Sen’s perspective, learning enriches life and expands the freedoms one enjoys. This allows one to become a fuller human being, to exercise one’s capacity for deliberate choice and to influence one’s world, to exercise some control.

Girls’/women’s ability to take advantage of learning opportunities has instrumental benefits for the wider society, because it provides a means of bringing other development goals closer to being realised. If approximately half the population of a community has restricted or limited access to relevant learning opportunities, that community’s social and economic development will be limited. If gender gaps are not addressed, girls and women will continue to be left on the margins of many societies, and the human potential of such societies will never be fully developed.

Evidence shows that if we empower girls/women with literacy skills and employment, we improve the overall well-being, education levels and health of their family and community. One study showed that even a single year of maternal education leads to children studying for an additional hour at home and to higher test scores (Andrabi, Das and Khwaja, 2009). A child who is born to a mother who can read is 50% more likely to survive past the age of 5. Learning opportunities for women boost their earning power and income potential: a single year of primary school has been shown to increase women’s wages later in life by 10–20% (Patrinos and Psacharopoulos, 2002). Closing the gender gap in learning would be a step towards the eradication of poverty and the growth of sustainable development.

KEY COMPONENTS OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING PROCESSES

Gender mainstreaming processes work to address serious gender gaps to create a more equitable world for both girls/women and boys/men. Fortunately, gender roles and attitudes are dynamic, so they can and do change. Development interventions such as ODL can lead to changes in gender roles that benefit entire communities. Gender mainstreaming processes are an attempt to ensure that these changes are based on a conscious effort to increase gender equality and equity and that the resources invested generate clear and positive results for all. These same principles apply in ODL institutions, which have the additional responsibility of ensuring that the ODL mode is not misused to perpetuate gender-based unequal practices.

A gender policy and action plan can provide guidance for building both staff and institutional ODL capacity. With the appropriate financial and human resources for mainstreaming gender perspectives (including factors such as age, ability, ethnicity and socio-economic status), commitments to gender equality could become an integral part of the development culture of an ODL organisation.

Inequalities perpetuating gender discrimination in larger societies are generally reflected within the cultures of their organisations.
GENDER MAINSTREAMING AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

ODL institutions provide learning opportunities to all people who want to take advantage of their programmes, and so are instrumental in creating gender-responsive policies, plans and programmes that allow for the expansion of options and fulfilment of human potential in an equitable manner.

1. GENDER POLICY

A gender policy outlines a general mandate and commitments to gender mainstreaming, parity and equality. To be effective and ensure staff buy-in, it must be based on extensive consultation with management, staff, educators and partners and include the following:

• Reference to international, regional or national commitments to ODL and gender equality, women’s empowerment and gender mainstreaming.

• A policy statement that clearly indicates the organisation’s commitment to human rights and gender mainstreaming.

• A definition of gender, gender equality and gender mainstreaming appropriate to ODL and relevant development issues, including engagement of boys/men in promoting gender equality and paying attention to their differentiated needs.

• A rationale for the policy (e.g. gender gaps in education and the need for information communication technology-savvy (ICT-savvy) women as teachers, educators, mentors and role models).

• A clear outline of which positions/staff will be responsible for implementing the policy.

• A definition of what the commitment to gender mainstreaming means for the ODL organisation.

• An outline of the relevant ODL organisational processes, such as:
  • a commitment to gender balance at all levels of the organisation;
  • the creation of an internal gender committee or body;
  • a gender capacity building strategy;
  • a general capacity building strategy that is responsive to the needs of both male and female employees, teachers and learners; and
  • a code of conduct with a zero-tolerance policy for any form of discrimination or violence.

2. GENDER ACTION PLAN

A gender action plan outlines how the ODL institution will implement its policy on gender mainstreaming internally and promote it with its partners. It involves:

• Briefly outlining the processes the organisation will use to implement, monitor and assess the policy.

• Making gender mainstreaming a part of the organisation’s culture by including it in all proposals, procedures and learning programmes.

• Integrating gender mainstreaming at all stages of the programme cycle, starting from programme design based on a gender analysis, to developing a gender strategy and implementation actions, to monitoring and evaluation.

• Identifying a number of initiatives based on the gender analysis that will particularly benefit a specific group of girls/women or boys/men.

• Allocating adequate budgetary resources to implement the action plan.

• Collecting sex-disaggregated quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (analytical) statistics, building databases
and staff capacity for analysing data and revising ODL programme delivery as needed, based on what the data reveal.

- Adopting human resource policies and practices that consider the impact of gender on staff’s opportunities, fulfilment of responsibilities and interactions (e.g. maternity and paternity leave, work/life measures).
- Hiring gender experts to support commitments, and building staff and institutional capacity.
- Enforcing staff accountability through performance appraisals, rewards and incentives.

GENDER RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING

1. GENDER ANALYSIS

Gender analysis refers to a variety of methods that help to explain the relationships between girls/women and boys/men, their access to and control of resources, their activities and the constraints they face relative to each other. The aim is to identify then address gender gaps. Sex-disaggregated statistics and information are central to the analysis. There are different approaches to gender analysis and a number of gender analysis frameworks.

Gender analysis is a way of looking at the impact of interventions on girls/women and boys/men. It provides information on the different roles of girls/women and boys/men in the household, community, workplace, economy and political processes. It requires separating data by sex, and understanding how work is divided, valued and rewarded. It asks how a particular activity, decision or plan will affect boys/men differently from girls/women, and will help to explain the current division of responsibilities and benefits and their effect on the distribution of rewards and incentives.

ODL institutions can then take the necessary steps to ensure that their policies, plans and programmes support gender equality, including any specific actions required to address gender-specific differences.

Although specific statistics on ODL are presently lacking in many contexts, a baseline survey of female and male learners targeted by an ODL institution is a starting point. A
gender analysis will analyse the differences in circumstances and needs of female and male learners, which will then inform the measures required to ensure equal opportunities for both learning and experiencing quality outcomes. Gender-responsive ODL programming can be created by:

1. Conducting gender analysis to understand and address the local context and any cultural gender discriminatory practices, and to identify the specific needs of female and male learners and the gender gaps between them.
2. Using the findings of this analysis to devise a gender-responsive ODL programme implementation and monitoring plan.
3. Conducting an independent gender evaluation of the learning programmes’ successes.

2. GENDER-RESPONSIVE IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING PLAN

Using the gender gaps and needs identified in the gender analysis and taking into account individual and institutional capacities, ODL institutions can identify concrete ways of integrating these needs into the design and delivery of learning programmes:

- Outline a specific gender equality goal or objective for the design and delivery of learning programmes to address the differential learning needs of both female and male learners and contribute to equitable access to learning resources (e.g. to facilitate higher numbers of graduates from courses).
- Identify gender-specific interventions if the gender analysis shows this is required.
- Provide inputs and activities to benefit female and male learners equally and pay close attention to their differential needs and capacities (e.g. train more female educators to be role models).
- Select a methodology that encourages participation of girls/women and boys/men in all areas of learning programmes.
- Allocate sufficient budgets to execute the activities and ensure adequate learner support, particularly for female and other marginalised learners’ benefit.
- Develop short-, medium- and long-term gender-related outcomes.

QUESTIONS TO ASK IN GENDER ANALYSIS AT EVERY LEVEL

- Who does what?
- Who has access to resources, benefits and opportunities?
- Who controls resources, benefits and opportunities?
- Who makes decisions? And why or why not?
- Who gains?
- Who loses?

- Devise gender-responsive indicators to measure progress — both quantitative and qualitative — and the effects of the programme on girls/women and boys/men. Sex-disaggregated baseline data provide the basis for monitoring and evaluating programmes.
- Monitor, and if necessary reassess and restructure, relevant inputs, activities and outputs in the programme. Monitoring is a continuous process of sex-disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data collection on the defined indicators and helps gauge if the programme is on track and the extent to which it is benefitting women and men equally.

3. PROGRAMMING LEVEL: GENDER EVALUATION

It is useful for the ODL institution to have an independent evaluation of its programmes. Usually this involves a gender audit of the level of gender sensitivity and commitment of institutional structures; and an evaluation of the programmes using a methodology that addresses programme design, relevance, efficacy and achievements in terms of the expected gender equality results.

Gender analysis is a way of looking at the impact of interventions on girls/women and boys/men.
CONCLUSION

Gender mainstreaming is an essential tool for learning for sustainable development. It facilitates equitable access to, participation in and benefits from learning opportunities. Learning leads the way to individual freedom and empowerment. Empowered people can make choices and decisions that influence their lives and environment — for the greater good.

Using gender mainstreaming strategies, ODL institutions can move more directly towards achieving the global goal of gender equality by: 1) identifying deeply entrenched institutional inequalities and socio-economic and cultural gender gaps through a gender analysis; and 2) addressing gender gaps through appropriate gender-responsive institutional policies and programming.

Gender-responsive ODL planning and programming can lead to gender-related results that can be monitored and evaluated, and then applied within a learning for sustainable development context. When gender mainstreaming is part of a learning for sustainable development strategy, it can help to address gender gaps, including ensuring that learning programmes are designed and delivered in ways that allow for girls/women and boys/men to learn on an equal footing and to have equal access to further study, employment opportunities and healthy lives — all of which are inextricably linked to sustainable development.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GENDER-RESPONSIVE ODL PROGRAMMES

- Baseline sex-disaggregated data are available to monitor progress.
- Realistic gender equality objectives, developed from a gender analysis where possible, that seek to promote a fair share of benefits for girls/women and boys/men are established.
- Gender equality results are expressed, measured and reported on using qualitative and quantitative indicators.
- Interventions that fit the context have been developed.
- Technologies are used to empower different groups and meet specific needs, including those of girls and women.
- Strategies are employed to involve people from the communities affected, especially in the adaptation of technology to suit local needs.
- Girls/women and boys/men participate equally in decision-making.
- Learning materials employ gender-responsive language, images and resources to avoid gender bias and stereotypes.

REFERENCES


Inter-Parliamentary Union. (n.d.). www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm

GENDER MAINSTREAMING PROCESS:

- Removes obstacles restricting the full enjoyment of one’s freedoms
- Addresses systemic and structural gender discrimination

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