

Young Women's Unemployment: The Education Factor



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Education For Women And Girls

When the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) came into existence in 1988, the United Nations Decade of Women with its theme of Equality, Development and Peace had contributed greatly to the process of eliminating obstacles to the improvement of the status of women at the national, regional and international levels. Out of this emerged the Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women which were designed to provide an effective guide for global action by the international community to the advancement of women and the elimination of gender-based discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, health and education.

The Commonwealth of Learning has provided a wide range of services to the people of the Commonwealth - women and men - and has focused its energies on the countries which are less well endowed, small and in the greatest need of increasing educational access. COL's services have made a significant impact in the orientation and thinking of policy-makers in the area of educational provision. Through demonstrations, advice, training and the exchange of materials and information, COL has been able to sensitise educational planners to the advantageous ways in which distance education, utilising both tested and emerging communication technologies, can be applied to expand and enhance learning opportunities.

COL is in a position to provide a unique contribution to education and training for women and girls, particularly in the developing countries of the Commonwealth, because distance education enables access to education at a time or place of the users choice. It combines flexibility, which allows women to study alongside their other responsibilities, with openness, thus offering them access to education and training they may have missed and now need. The overall aim of the Commonwealth of Learning's programme for women is to improve the status of women through widening access to education.

The international development community has increasingly recognised the power of distance education. For instance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's Agenda for Gender Equality commits itself to "Promote education for women's self-empowerment at all levels and in all fields by assisting Member States to ensure equal access to relevant quality education and training for girls and women, including the development of distance education as an effective means of reaching the unreached."

Indeed, as the 1995 World Education Report pointed out, the international political commitment in favour of the education of women and girls has never been stronger than it is today. Most countries now agree that the education of women and girls must have priority in their education policies. But support for education and training has to contend with the constraint of dwindling resources.

In general, the prospects of achieving rapid advances in the educational participation of girls in countries where their participation is currently very limited are tied up with these countries development prospects overall. As the 1995 World Education Report noted, the biggest male-female gaps in literacy and participation in formal education tend to be in countries where the levels of literacy and educational participation are low for both males and females. The challenge of increasing the access of girls to schooling and providing increased opportunities for them to continue to higher levels is therefore part of a broader challenge to provide increased educational opportunities as such, for both girls and boys.

Investing in formal and non-formal education and training for girls and women has proved to be one of the best means of achieving sustainable development and economic growth. Although overall progress has been achieved in girls enrolment at primary and secondary levels, girls in many countries still face discrimination. Young women continue to be denied quality education, especially at higher levels and in science and technology.

The barriers to participation of girls and women in science and technology is a concern to the Commonwealth of Learning and an area in which we have done some research. More women choose to enrol in arts, human studies and social science than they do in mathematics, science and technology, the world over. The origin of this under-representation of women has been largely structural, created in and through the social structures of the institutions and the segmentation of the labour market, and internalised in values and beliefs about appropriate roles and expectations. These factors are manifested in a host of barriers to women's participation, both general and specific to the technological domain. Our recently concluded research effort found that distance education can achieve results in facilitating the participation of women, both young and mature, in technological education under the right conditions.

In order to understand how distance education may be helping to improve access to education for women in particular, we must explore exactly what is meant by distance education. In a very basic sense, distance education is the means by which the teacher is taken literally to the student. It is a teaching and a learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by communications technologies. Perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of distance education is that it is learner-centred.

A learner-centred educational process means departing from a conventional teaching and learning culture to one which employs a wide range of tools to effect learning outcomes. These tools recognise and are designed for self-learning. They include printed course units and readers, tutor- and computer-marked assignment and feedback systems, radio and television broadcasts, audio and video tapes, home kits and individualised counselling and help through telephone, facsimiles or electronic mail. It is not insignificant that these tools also relate to the world of work.

A concept which is often coupled with distance education is that of open learning. These are not synonymous terms, but may be complementary educational processes. "Open" learning refers to openness in admission to programmes of study where eligibility barriers such as those that exist in the conventional system are relaxed or non-existent. Open learning is also characterised by flexibility in the choice of media to be utilised in studies, in attendance at contact sessions with tutors/facilitators or other students, and in setting a study schedule and examination date.

As I have mentioned, a key characteristic of distance education and open learning is that it is learner-centred. This fundamental characteristic is important for the education of women and girls as research has demonstrated that women do not value a 'power relationship', such as that often found in conventional education, in which knowledge and communication flow primarily from teacher to student. Women prefer two-way communication and dialogue which support and encourage their thinking as well as promote critical reflection. Distance education is actually well placed to develop an educational system which is sensitive to two-way communication, already having turned education around by centering on the learner. Although interactive communication with teachers and other students is difficult for distance education students, correspondence, computers and electronic mail, telephone conversations and audio-cassettes assist the two-way flow of communication.

A question which is often asked about women and distance education, and particularly the aspect of distance education that offers students the flexibility to study when and where they wish to, which is often in the home, is whether or not distance education reinforces "traditional" gender roles and expectations by facilitating the isolation of women in the home. This argument, in my view, undermines the benefits of education and the positive psychological effects of improving one's education and successful goal attainment. The appeal and outcomes of distance education, particularly for women, are significant. As one feminist analyst stated, distance education "... may be a physical delineation, but it is not necessarily a psychological boundary."

Employment And Women

Having explored some of the characteristics of distance education and how it may help to improve access to education for women, we must ask why it is imperative that access to education for women and girls be improved. There are many good reasons, however, I wish to focus on just one which is relevant to this session of your conference: employment.

One of my colleagues who combines her expert work in distance education with service to an international organisation of women professionals, initiated a programme in which scholarships are

offered to women in Zambia to gain computer skills. My colleague recently received a letter from one of the students who has been awarded a scholarship, and I wish to tell you a bit about this letter which helps to put a very personal dimension on the link between education and employment, which I will be discussing.

The young woman who wrote to my colleague has three children. She wrote that she is the provider for her family as her husband is unemployed due to a medical condition. She completed secondary school and then went on to courses in short-hand and typing but could not continue due to financial difficulties. She started work as a fax and telex operator but lost her job due to the closing of the company for which she worked. She explains that the computer scholarship will help her a long way as the course is very expensive in Zambia and had it not been for the financial support, in her words, she "would not even dream of taking up such a step." This young woman expects that attaining computer skills will help her find employment and will therefore be of great benefit to her family.

The available statistics show that there has been an upward trend in women's participation in paid employment in almost all regions of the world since 1985. The International Labour Organisation's 1994 report found that 41% of women, aged 15 years and above, are economically active in the world today. The ILO report also found that the "glass ceiling" has been broken through in some instances and this trend is linked to the significant advancements made in women's education, vocational and other forms of training, and the positive legal and other practical measures that have increasingly been implemented in many parts of the world.

Despite significant progress, however, equality of opportunity and treatment for women and men in employment have not been fully achieved. The 1995 World Education Report noted that in the Latin American and Caribbean Region, which has progressed further than other developing regions towards equal educational opportunities for the two sexes, a series of studies recently carried out by the World Bank show that women generally are paid less even when they have the same education and length of work experience as men. This could be an indication that they either still tend to hold jobs that are of lower value to employers than those filled by men, or they are being exploited.

In referring to issues of "employment" and "unemployment", it is very important to consider the factor that in developing economies, wage-earning occupations are not the norm and the nature of work is very different. In many countries of sub-Saharan Africa and some Latin American and Asian countries, only a small proportion of the population is formally employed, the great majority being involved in the traditional subsistence economy.

As one analyst has studied, the position of women in subsistence economies is very stark. The analyst notes:

Women perform the lion's share of work in subsistence economies, toiling longer hours and contributing more to family income than their male relatives ... In developing countries, women work an average of 12 to 18 hours per day - producing food, managing and harvesting resources, and working at a variety of paid and unpaid activities - compared to 8 to 12 hours for men....

Indications are that the position of women within subsistence economies is growing increasingly insecure. The growing time constraints imposed on women by the longer hours they must work to make ends meet simultaneously lowers their status and keeps birth rates high. When they can no longer increase their own labour burdens, women lean heavily on the contributions of their children - especially girls - to alleviate time constraints. In fact, the increasing tendency in many areas to keep girls out of school to help with their mothers' work virtually ensures that another generation of females will grow up with lesser prospects than their brothers.

Furthermore, there continues to be an under-valuation of women's economic contributions and a significant part of women's work remains invisible. Notwithstanding their increasing participation in the labour force, generally, women still retain primary responsibility for child care and household management, and this has had an influence on both the kinds of paid employment they are willing to accept and the kinds they are likely to be offered.

As the 1995 Human Development Report notes, women's work is greatly undervalued in economic terms. This is due in part to the restricted definition of economic activity, as well as the notion of value itself. In common use, economic valuation is synonymous with market valuation. Not only do household and community work remain unvalued in the market, but this important "work" also transcends market value. These activities have intrinsic human value that are not captured by their value for exchange. The Human Development Report asks: "Is there any reason that only work for the market-place should be valued and that work must have an exchange value, not just a human value, to be recognized in economic terms?" The Report urges that the idea be resisted that, to be valued, human activity must always be assigned a market price. It is noted, however, that by not giving an economic value to these activities, the contribution of women is seriously underestimated. Because status in contemporary society is so often equated with income-earning power, women suffer a major under-valuation of their economic status. If full recognition is given to the need to reward non-market work, the implications for the way that society is structured are revolutionary.

Unemployment And Women

Having looked at the varied landscape of women's work - paid and unpaid - it will be clear how the issue of young women's unemployment is complex and challenging.

In many parts of the world, economies have been undergoing structural adjustment programmes which have in one way or another precipitated the removal of many jobs of low value and even lower skills, which has had a very strong impact on women who tend to be concentrated in these jobs.

Young women are particularly disadvantaged when compared to other unemployed groups as they face the challenges of not only gender-based discrimination, but also the particular complications of being a young person looking for work. As a Commonwealth Expert Group on young people and unemployment found, the problem of youth unemployment is a major issue for all Commonwealth countries. And, while statistics can quantify the problem, it is the impact on the individuals, their community and the country's economy which shows the true measure of youth unemployment.

A young person who is unemployed not only misses out on the income that work provides, but also the less tangible rewards, like self-esteem. For its part, the community lacks the wealth that employment brings and can suffer the destructive side effects of having a large number of young people with too much unproductive time on their hands. The nation as a whole misses out on the creative energies that young people can contribute towards increasing its wealth and hence its standard of living.

However, as the task force pointed out, the nature and meaning of concepts such as "youth employment", "unemployment" and "labour force" will differ from country to country and culture to culture. Given those different understandings, the policies and programmes which will seek to increase youth employment, decrease unemployment and create a skilled and active labour force are also likely to differ.

There are particular differences between the developing and developed countries. One commentator explained it in this way:

The use of the terms 'employment' and 'unemployment' in connection with the Third World has to be made with care because the concepts associated with these terms are derived with reference to an individual country and don't apply in the same way to the Third World. It is valid to describe an individual seeking a wage job as unemployed only in the context of an economy where a vast majority of the working population is obliged to sell its labour to others on a regular basis. But to do so in an economy which is based on casual wage employment and self-employment is to define the employment norm in terms of conditions enjoyed by a tiny majority of the labour force.

The Commonwealth Youth Programme has produced a reference document in the form of a workbook, with which you may be familiar, called "Approaching Youth Employment." This document provides an analytical framework for looking at the causes of unemployment in a particular context which helps to address the concerns of defining unemployment in a particular society, economy or cultural milieu. This analytical framework examines the relative segmentation of the labour market in concert with the structural or cyclical nature of unemployment.

Segmentation refers to the concentration, or lack of concentration, of youths in a particular range of jobs. For instance, in a highly segmented youth labour market, young people are concentrated in a specific range of jobs where there is little or no competition between them and adults for employment. In such situations, there are effectively two labour markets. In a non-segmented youth labour market, young people and other groups of workers compete for the same jobs and are subject to the same market forces.

While labour market segmentation is one aspect of youth unemployment analysis, the second is the cause of unemployment. Structural unemployment exists when there is a mismatch between people who are unemployed and the jobs that are available. Cyclical unemployment, on the other hand, is tied to a fall in the demand for labour caused by economic downturn or recession.

In the training sessions which you will be holding during this conference, I am sure that you will look further at how these processes of segmentation, structural changes in the labour market and cyclical economic developments affect unemployment, especially unemployment among young people.

One factor which you may wish to examine during your discussions is urbanisation and its impact on young women's employment. The Habitat II conference which took place last month (June) and the recently-released report of the United Nations Population Fund are focusing some attention on this issue.

Studies show that the growing proportion of rural to urban migration streams is made up of women. Migration is highly concentrated around the time of entry into the labour force, between the ages of 15 and 24 and recently; a trend among women towards migration at younger ages has developed, concentrated between ages 10 and 20. Studies in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa suggest that the availability of low-skilled domestic work in urban areas increasingly draws younger women to them. These studies also show that women migrants tend to have less education than their male counterparts, though this reflects the general difference in women's opportunities; women migrants also tend to have more education than women who do not migrate. Nevertheless, these women are at a disadvantage when they reach the city, and may find themselves trapped in low-wage employment without the qualifications to advance, but still with too much education for work in the home.

For most women, there is little change in the type of work they do after they migrate. One-third to one-half of female urban migrants find jobs in domestic or personal service. Trading unpaid domestic labour at home for the same work (though paid) in the city or cultivating vegetables in order to sell them, does nothing real for the autonomy of these women. Opportunities for advancement depend on the skills which women bring with them to the urban milieu and their resourcefulness in acquiring new skills.

I note that the United Nations Population Fund's Report, like the Commonwealth Youth Programme's, "Approaching Youth Unemployment" workbook, identifies education and training as central in promoting employment opportunities for young people, especially young women and girls.

It is important to stress that the quality of education is as vital as the number of students to be educated. Overcrowded schools with inadequate supplies and facilities cannot educate effectively. In many developing countries, particularly those least developed, only a small proportion of students who complete elementary school go on to secondary education. This may be a family decision arising out of poverty or a low value being placed on education, and may also be enforced by an overstrained school system which can only make room for a small proportion of secondary level students.

As the United Nations Population Fund reported, the bias is greater against girls when difficult decisions are being made on priorities for allocating scarce family resources. The assumption is that girls will benefit less from education and will return less to the family. Girls are assumed to be needed at home and education is a luxury which poor families cannot afford. This has created a gender gap in education which varies from country to country but remains highest among the poorer nations. The International Conference on Population and Development recognised both the gender gap and the need to eliminate it, agreeing that women were the largest untapped human resource of any developing country.

Another important trend to look at when examining issues of unemployment is the advent of technology. A recent International Commission on Education (the Delors Commission) proposes that in many

respects, the rapid spread of unemployment in recent years in a great many countries represents a structural phenomenon bound up with technological progress. The systematic replacement of human labour by innovative technology contributes to the underemployment of a portion of the workforce. First felt in production factories and other such work environments, this is something that is now affecting other jobs and is likely to move higher up the ladder of skills as even more advanced technologies are introduced.

Work continues to change in contemporary societies. The Delors Commission observed that the nature of work has already changed considerably in recent years, with a distinct increase in the tertiary sector, which today employs a quarter of the labour force of the developing countries and more than two-thirds in the industrialised world. The emergence and development of information societies and continued technological development, which are marked trends of the late twentieth century, emphasise the increasingly "intangible" dimension of work and accentuate the role played by intellectual and social skills. Education systems can therefore no longer be expected to train a labour force for stable industrial jobs; instead, they must train individuals to be innovative and adaptable in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

I hope that in making a case for the interconnectedness of education and employment, I have not convinced you that education has no other purpose than to provide a skilled workforce for the new economies, or a highly adaptable workforce for the new technological environment. Education is much, much more. All over the world, learning has become synonymous with the increase in wealth, health, productivity, social mobility, equity, human and cultural rights and participatory citizenship. Advanced and new democracies, as they begin to prepare for the challenges and opportunities of the next millennium, are struggling to make learning and knowledge a central aspect of their social and economic activity. Until the mid-sixties of this century, education was not more than an initiation into social and economic life. This was reflected in policies and practices that attempted to make schooling universal. Today's ambition is to make the acquisition of knowledge a lifelong activity in which the school becomes the laboratory for making individual mature learners, with an autonomous capacity to self-learn outside school walls throughout their lives.

The activities of the Guiding Associations throughout the Commonwealth are excellent examples of the non-traditional education and training strategies which are the key to the development of lifelong learning that will take place not just within school walls, but also in our work and in our voluntary activities. By developing leadership skills and community awareness in young women who participate in guiding, the Guiding Associations are making an extremely important contribution to the social and economic health of their nations. This impact extends globally to the education projects that you undertake and which makes a significant contribution to the beneficiary countries.

I note that one of the Guiding Laws for the Girl Guides of Canada is to "use my resources wisely." This is a fundamental law and one which not only Guides, but all individuals and organisations such as the one I represent, must abide by. In addressing some of the challenges of youth unemployment and the education and training strategies that are so intertwined with employment, Commonwealth organisations and

associations need to join forces and pool their resources, whether human or physical. The Commonwealth of Learning has recently launched an important co-operative initiative with the Commonwealth Youth Programme to help to adapt some of their training materials into the distance education mode in order that more young people may be trained. I hope that there will be other such opportunities and scope for co-operation with key organisations such as the Guides to assist young women and girls in particular, and I welcome your questions and suggestions.