

# Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage: A Holistic Approach



**18 April 2018**

Women's Forum, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)  
London, United Kingdom

Professor Asha Kanwar  
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)  
Co-written with Ms Frances Ferreira, COL

Even today, we find a wide prevalence of child early and forced marriage. Let me share what the Commonwealth of Learning is doing to prevent this through this presentation prepared jointly with my colleague Frances Ferreira.

COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met thirty years ago in Vancouver for CHOGM 1987. Ever since, we have been in beautiful British Columbia, which makes us the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation not in London

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

This aligns closely with SDG 4 which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

Our strategy is to harness the potential of existing and new technologies to achieve development outcomes.

Women's equality and empowerment are central to COL's vision of promoting learning for sustainable development. COL uses distance learning and technologies to reach the unreached women and girls in developing countries.

With support from the governments of Canada and Australia, COL launched a project to empower women and girls.

COL is working with partners in five countries, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania, to school and skill girls for livelihoods so that child early and forced marriage can be prevented.

These five countries have high rates of child marriage. But according to a UNICEF report we have seen a decrease over the last two years.

There is a growing awareness and as a religious leader in India told us ‘If girls are not educated they are compelled to early marriages. Most of these girls who enter into early marriage cannot even take care of themselves, so how can they take care of their children?’

Fatima, a 14 year old girl in Mozambique, experienced much abuse from her step mother so when her father received a marriage proposal from his colleague, he readily agreed. During the door to door visits conducted by our partner, the community facilitator asked Fatima why she was not in school and sought the support of the community leader. Initially, the father was reluctant to listen, but after a few visits, he and agreed to put a stop to the marriage. Since then, Fatima has been supported by the GirlsInspire project to return to school.

Atia lives in a remote region in Bangladesh. Married at the age of 12, she is 22 years old and has two children. Under the GirlsInspire project she received training in sewing and sewing machine operation. Atia took a loan from her father and bought herself a sewing machine. Now she earns 9,000 Bangladeshi Taka per month, has repaid the loan and her son attends school. Since Atia earns an income, she has more agency within her household and as she told us confidently "Now I can make decisions’

Girls Inspire contributes to breaking gender stereotypes by training girls in non-traditional skills such as carpentry in Bangladesh and electrical installation in Mozambique.

In India, girls were trained in computer & mobile literacy. For most of them, this was their first contact with a computer.

In the last two years, we have reached over 35000 women and girls, of whom nearly 7000 have increased access to income generating activities. Over 177000 community members were reached and as a result of various advocacy efforts and community support 453 child marriages were averted. What were the critical success factors?

Community engagement was one of our main strategies. The community is informed through street theatre performances, the radio, boat shows and awareness raising events. The project partners consult local government officials and key influencers in the community. Collaboration with relevant ministries such as health and labour is important. Finally, the members of the family must be empowered—this was done through self-growth sessions for mothers and advocacy meetings with parents.

In many communities, female mobility is limited. In Bangladesh, boat schools reached the unreached girls with training facilities while in India and Mozambique mobile learning centres travelled to remote locations, and in Pakistan, pop-up learning centres, also referred to as mobile centres, were used. The point is to find local solutions to reach the girls and provide them with safe learning environments.

Capacity is built by making girls aware of their social and legal rights as well as health care. This helps them understand their choices and boosts their confidence for decision-making. This would not be possible without enlisting the support of fathers, brothers and spouses.

The health and safety of the girls is equally important—many of them are young mothers. GIRLS Inspire worked with various stakeholders to improve girls’ and women’s health and safety by providing information about where to access resources and support networks.

GIRLS Inspire improved girls’ and women’s ability to gain desirable employment and acquire financial skills through appropriate training. This included career counselling, employment placements and internships. For those wishing to establish their own enterprise, links were made with financial institutions for loans.

This model involves the girls, their families and communities. Local partners and employers are critical to the success of this project. COL catalyses the linkages between all these stakeholders and monitors progress to ensure results are on track. This is a holistic approach that brings together key stakeholders within the community to support girls' learning for sustainable livelihoods.

The baseline and endline surveys clearly indicate the change in the community's response to women and girls. At the outset there was limited support in the community for women and girls' education but this has changed substantially over two years. Similarly, there is a changed perception within the family regarding decision-making by girls compared to what we started out with.

A study found that the likelihood of being employed increased by 50 percent after the training. The average number of hours of paid work nearly doubled and there was a fivefold increase in income as compared to the start of the project. This study also corroborated the findings of the previous survey that there was a 10% increase in female decision-making in the family.

What are the key lessons learned? The first step is to get the community on side and leverage the support of male allies in the community--fathers, village leaders, husbands, brothers. Conducting sessions with mothers can influence the decisions relating to their daughters' marriage. Safe learning environments can be developed through community-negotiated agreements. Partnerships with multiple stakeholders are critical. Providing training is not enough—we must also provide the opportunities—by creating linkages with the labor market and financial institutions.

What makes for the sustainability and scale of the project? What happens when the initiating agency leaves? The first is to digitize training programmes in the local languages so that they can reach a wider group.

The second is to create skill-based value chains which will enable women and girls to not only sell products and services locally but to engage in online selling. In this way women and girls, even in the smallest villages, can engage in the emerging global marketplace.

Finally, engaging governments to take ownership and make the necessary policy changes and provide the resources will ensure women's continued education and economic participation.

Thank you for your kind attention