

# Empowering Girls for Ending Child Early and Forced Marriage



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

But first an introduction to COL. 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 and we have a regional office for Asia in Delhi.

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. 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 Commonwealth countries, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania, to skill girls for livelihoods so that child early and forced marriage can be prevented. These five countries have high rates of child marriage. According to a UNICEF report we have seen a decrease over the last two years. But much more needs to be done.

A recent World Bank report on educating girls to end child marriage in Tanzania

highlights the development costs of early marriage. Girls who marry early or drop out of education have poor health, larger families, earn less as adults and often face domestic violence. They also have less decision-making power within the family.

How can we keep girls in schools? The report proposes several measures: well-resourced and safe schools close to where the girls live. Role models and female teachers would also attract more girls to school.

Improved opportunities for local employment could be an added incentive and as we found in our own experience, engaging the community, particularly mothers, is critical to bringing and keeping girls in school. Let me share some stories of how community engagement has helped save several girls in the five countries where we work.

Sumaiya Khatun from Bangladesh is 14 years and completed grade 8. She was enrolled in a COL-supported training programme, but was absent for several days. The technical trainer and gender facilitator went to her house and found out that she was kept under ‘house-arrest’, because her parents had arranged her marriage. The Local Support Group members were delegated to persuade Sumaiya's parents to stop this. Her father was angry at first, but when he was told that he could be sentenced to two years’ imprisonment and fined a huge amount according to the Child Marriage restraint law of Bangladesh, he relented and has let her enroll in class 9. This shows that laws and legislation are important but even more critical is awareness about these provisions.

Rupali from India dropped out of school when she was in grade 9. She enrolled in the COL-supported financial literacy classes and after completing the course she opened her own savings account. She joined the livelihoods training where she learned about goat rearing and artificial insemination. Today she is known as a ‘goat doctor’ and earns her livelihood through artificially inseminating goats. Rupali would like to own her own smart phone so that she can use it to market her services and access information to improve her practice. Today girls know that with hard work and perseverance it is possible to achieve their dreams.

Natalia is from Mozambique. Her parents could not afford to send her to school and a wealthy man offered to pay her school fees when she was nine. When she was 17 the donor came back to her parents and claimed his investment. Having no money or assets to pay back with, her parents allowed the man to marry her. A journey of torture and violence started for her. After she had two children, she decided to leave her husband out of fear for their health and lives. The GIRLS Inspire project offered her a second chance. The training taught her problem solving and conflict resolution skills as well as cooking a balanced and nutritious meal. Natalia says ‘I am confident that I will positively influence the lives of my children who I will raise up differently from the way my parents raised me thinking that marriage is the solution to poverty for girls’. Opportunities for skills development are providing a way out of the vicious cycle of poverty and violence.

Ramsha in Pakistan was married when she was just 12 years old. Being an innocent child, she thought that the many tortures she underwent were a normal part of married life. When Ramsha’s father found out, he brought her back. Unfortunately, there was a reconciliation, which led to more torture. Her parents supported her to file for a divorce. Her mother said, “I believe it is our mistake that our daughter is in this condition. She was innocent, but we were sensible. We should have thought about the consequences before marrying her off at an early age. I will not let this happen to my remaining other two little daughters.” Ramsha has since completed a beautician’s course and attended self-growth workshops to restart her life with new goals and determination. Ramsha is now enrolled in the Open School at the Allama Iqbal Open University to pursue both education and career. Our partner Bedari supported her and motivated her to be their “Volunteer for change”. Courageous girls such as Ramsha can be powerful advocates and role models in the community.

Rukhsana, also from Pakistan, was prevented from continuing her education after the tenth grade due to financial constraints and she was married off. She heard about the COL supported free skills training from local female social mobilisers. To help lift her family out of poverty, she enrolled in a beautician course. She also listened to daily lectures on Life Skills and Basic Education. It was because of these lectures that

she was inspired to aim higher and participate in the municipal committee elections and became the first lady councilor in her area. This opportunity would have remained a distant dream for Rukhsana had she not been given the training and the encouragement and support from our partners SPARC (Minal Kiani, Communications Focal Point, SPARC).

Rhodasia a Tanzanian, dropped out of school when she was 17 and was married the following year. She attended GIRLS Inspire training and is now the Chairperson of a self-help group. Motivated by her training Rhodasia is working towards diversifying her self-help group's products to increase sales by covering the entire community. She aspires to train other young girls and to start a large-scale production house in the future. Our objective is not just to help women and girls to survive but to think big and be able to fulfil their aspirations.

Girls Inspire also 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 three years, we have reached over 63000 women and girls, of whom more than 11000 have increased access to income generating activities. Over 435000 community members were reached and as a result of various advocacy efforts and community support 1181 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. 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 three years. Similarly, there is a changed perception within the family regarding decision-making by girls compared to what we started out with.

A COL 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