

# Build Back Better: digital learning and skills



**3 September 2020**

Virtual Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers for Women's Affairs  
and Gender and Development on COVID-19

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Secretary General, Hon Ministers, Colleagues, greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver. I would like to thank the SG for the opportunity to share some examples of COL's work and how various technologies have been used for the education and training for women and girls during COVID-19.

How do we build back better? By ensuring that girls do not drop out of school as they did when Ebola hit Sierra Leone. By continuing to skill women for livelihoods and address the issue of violence against women and girls.

First, education. Before the pandemic, the children were picked up from their homes and they attended classes in the boat schools.

Since this was no longer possible, the boats picked the teachers and took them to the students. Farida Khatun teaches classes to a small group of children respecting safety protocols, and then travels to the next destination – covering three student groups in a day. The only technology that can reach these children is print.

COL has been promoting open schools--a flexible distance learning model of providing secondary education—open schools in India, Bangladesh and Namibia enrol large numbers with a high percentage of girls—65% in Namibia. The Namibian Open school costs one fifth per learner compared to government secondary schools. These open schools remained open during the pandemic and in addition were able to provide their printed course materials to students of regular schools in several countries, including Botswana. Because of flexibility and lower costs, open schools can be a viable means of ensuring that the education of girls is not disrupted during crisis situations.

Second, skills for livelihoods. COL leveraged the potential of basic phones to ensure that women farmers continued to learn agriculture and financial literacy through MobiMOOCs. The training is structured as a series of short audio lessons in local languages. MobiMOOCs have reached more than 7,500 farmers since COVID-19 lockdowns began and offered a solution to reaching the last person in the queue.

Another project in India where COL was training 5,000 women face to face in digital skills for entrepreneurship had to pivot to a hybrid model. Most of the women had smartphones and were able to use video-based calls and webinars, as well as WhatsApp for the training. This was supplemented by face-to-face sessions where physical distancing was possible.

COL in partnership with the Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative has offered opportunities for skilling and reskilling 100,000 Commonwealth citizens for employability, 40% of whom are women and girls. While many learners can access these courses through their mobile devices, those who have little or no access to the Internet are able to use public libraries in Sri Lanka, Ghana and a number of other African nations. Girls from Fatima Jinnah Women's University, Pakistan have successfully completed some of the employment related courses.

Third, violence. Working with The Solomon Islands National Council of Women, COL has developed a Mobile App to improve access to and awareness of Social Safety Nets in consultation with communities. The App provides information regarding various services across the nation related to gender issues, sickness, disability, education, health and violence.

Finally, leadership. In an effort to help young women and girls become successful in their field of interest and build the future generation of leaders, COL has launched CommonwealthWiseWomen.org. This mentoring programme links mentors and mentees via a safe forum where they can share ideas and learn from each other. The initiative has attracted several key role models from across the Commonwealth including our Secretary General.

As you have seen, COL uses a range of technologies to ensure that learning continues even during a crisis. This is very important, especially for women. In a COL study on women farmers in Kenya we found that learning leads to empowerment and for every 1% increase in empowerment there is a 2.3% increase in economic benefits. Empowered women will be critical to building back better.

Thank you.