

Launching of the “Lifelong Learning for Women’s Empowerment”



Launching of the “Lifelong Learning for Women’s Empowerment,” Mauritius, 19 May, 2011

presented by Prof. Asha Kanwar and co-written by K. Balasubramanian, Commonwealth of Learning

Transcript

Hon Sheela Bappoo, Hon Dr Jeetah, Sir John Daniel, Dr Coonjan, COL Focal Points, distinguished representatives from the women’s associations and senior officials from various ministries, members of the press, ladies & gentlemen

It is a privilege to be part of this historic launch. More especially since gender equality is a cross cutting theme for the Commonwealth of Learning’s objective of promoting “Learning for Development”.

Gender equality is one of the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth. In fact, the theme for the Commonwealth Day observed in March this year was ‘Women as agents of change: invest in women and transform the world’. An increasing number of governments are realizing the value of investing in gender equality and improving the status of women.

Why is gender equality important for achieving the development goals? As Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations said *‘It is impossible to realise our goals while discriminating against half the human race’*. The third Millennium Development Goal or MDG 3 seeks to promote gender equality and empower women. A goal in its own right, it also helps to progress the other goals such as MDG 2, which seeks to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education by 2015; MDGs 4 & 5 which aim to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health and MDG 6 which seeks to eliminate HIV/AIDS, as well as MDG 1 which aims to reduce poverty. If all these goals have to be realized by 2015, both national governments and the international community will have to focus on achieving gender equality.

What is gender equality? It simply means that both men and women have the same rights and opportunities in any society. This is an aspiration that many countries have, yet how many have achieved gender equality? In most countries in the Commonwealth, with some exceptions, we find that it is women who are disadvantaged. Of the 796 million illiterate adults in the world, two thirds are women. In sub-Saharan Africa, women produce 80% of the crops but only own 1% of the land (World Bank). Almost eight out of ten farmers who produce staple food in Africa are women but most of them do not own land

or resources in their name nor do they have access to credit. Studies in Africa show that when women generate income through agriculture, it benefits not only the families but entire communities. Countries now realize that women play a crucial role in development and it is important that they are empowered.

If we want to empower women, they must have three things

1. Rights
2. resources, and
3. a voice

Since this is such an important message, let me repeat it in Creole:

Banne madame bisin ena trios kikchose importants:

1. *Droits*
2. *Access a banne resources*
3. *Ene la voix*

What are some countries doing to enable women to have these three critical elements?

Let us take rights first. There are several new initiatives under way to give women the right to property. Ghana has new inheritance laws so that land can be given to widows and children. Similarly in Uganda, the law has upheld the rights of widows against the land claims of their sons.

What are some examples of access to resources? As we know women are largely responsible for unpaid domestic work. There are many benefits when women are allowed access to and control over resources. One obvious benefit is the increased investment in the education and health of their children. Access to water in rural areas improves women's productivity. When water was provided within 400 metres of the households in Uganda and Zambia, women saved over 100-600 hours of time per year—time that could be spent in more productive activities.

It is also important for women to have a voice in economic and political affairs. In India, one third of all local government seats are reserved for women—this resulted in over 500,000 women being elected to the Panchayat Raj. Norway introduced a 40% quota for women to be represented on corporate Boards. France has also followed this example by introducing a 40% quota on their board. COL however needed no reservation or quota system and has more than 55% women members on its international Board of Governors.

If women are to have rights, resources and a voice, then they must have education and training. There is a saying in Africa that when you educate a girl, you educate a nation. Mauritius has a very impressive record of educating its girls and women at primary secondary and tertiary levels. In June 2010, the *Economist* looked at a Women's Economic Opportunity Index in 113 countries. Mauritius ranked very

high at 37, way ahead of South Africa, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India. The visionary leaders of this country are to be congratulated on this very significant achievement.

The Commonwealth of Learning is doing its part in contributing to gender equality through the use of distance education and appropriate technologies. Under our Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative in India and Sri Lanka, women are learning dairy farming and goat rearing through the use of basic mobile phones. In a goat-rearing programme, those women who went through this learning process made more money and their goats were healthier compared to those who did not participate in this training. In Malawi, training in mother and child health is being given through community radios. In India thousands of women in rural areas are being trained in health and nutrition using community radios.

The legal literacy programme being initiated today is a very major step in helping women to understand their rights, their access to resources and in finding a strong voice. This will empower women to get access to resources like credit and emerge as entrepreneurs in agriculture and natural resource management.

Women have come a long way. From being burnt at the funeral pyres of their husbands to being beaten for seeking the vote, they are increasingly heading governments, ministries, institutions. It is a time for optimism. I am glad all of us are here to share this.

Thank you for your kind attention.