

Promoting Learning for Sustainable Development



08 March 2021

Commonwealth Day Virtual Event
Global Affairs Canada

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Hon Minister, Excellencies, Colleagues, thank you for the opportunity to introduce the Commonwealth of Learning and to share some examples of our work with women and girls as we celebrate both the Commonwealth and the International Women's Days.

COL is the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation in Canada and was established when Heads of Government met for CHOGM in Vancouver.

We were set up to support Commonwealth member states and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for human resource development. This visionary idea has grown and flowered especially during the pandemic when distance learning was embraced globally and almost overnight.

Our mission is to promote learning for sustainable development. COL works in two sectors: education and skills with gender as a crosscutting theme.

We leverage new and existing technologies to achieve impact. Do please visit us when you are in Vancouver for a full briefing of our work.

COL is funded by voluntary contributions from Member States—the seven major donors are Canada, India, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria and South Africa. Every year we receive contributions from about 47 countries.

We in turn are working to help countries build back better. That means ensuring that women and girls do not drop out of school, are skilled for livelihoods and empowered to deal with issues of violence.

First, education. Before the pandemic, COL supported boat schools in Bangladesh to provide education to hard to reach children.

Since this was no longer possible during the pandemic, the boats brought the teachers to the students. Print was the only technology available.

Open schools can provide flexible and cost-effective learning opportunities through the use of distance learning. These young girls go to a COL-supported open school in Belize.

Second, skills for livelihoods. In collaboration with COUSERA, COL offered free training opportunities to 150,000 youth around the Commonwealth for workforce recovery. The greatest uptake was in the Caribbean—Barbados, Grenada, Guyana and St Lucia. These girls from Pakistan have successfully completed skills development courses from some of the top universities in the world.

But for those with no access to the internet, COL leveraged the potential of basic phones to ensure that women farmers continued to learn agriculture and financial literacy through MobiMOOCs.

Third, violence. In the Solomon Islands, COL developed a Mobile App to provide women with information regarding services available for education, health and violence.

In an effort to help young women and girls remain motivated during this difficult time, COL launched CommonwealthWiseWomen.org. This mentoring programme links eminent women to girls in remote regions using a range of technologies including WhatsApp.

Thanks to the governments of Canada and Australia, over 106000 girls in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania were trained for livelihoods and nearly 1200 child early and forced marriages averted. You will hear directly from some of these girls.