

# Promoting open schooling for girls and young mothers



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Hello. My name is Tony Mays. I am the Commonwealth of Learning's Education Specialist for Open Schooling and also the managing associate editor for its Journal of Learning for Development.

I am honoured to be invited to make a presentation to you today on Promoting open schooling for girls and young mothers.

We start with a sobering reflection ... many countries have reported that while schools have re-opened not all children have come back ... moreover there is a growing incidence of "school refusal" in some countries ...

While COL has championed education for girls and women for many years, in its current strategic plan, addressing the needs of out-of-school-girls has been identified as a priority for the open schooling initiative ...

## **Why is it important to get girls into or back into schooling?**

COL sees gender equality as a human right – there should be equal responsibilities, opportunities and rights regardless of a person's birth sex or subsequent sexual orientation/gender identification.

Although it is a human right ... addressing gender inequality can also have direct socio-economic benefits ... as argued by the OECD

And, as the World Bank has noted, there is a significant multiplier effect in educating girls and women ... So why are so many girls NOT in school?

Globally, 650 million girls and women alive today were married before their 18th birthday, and the highest prevalence of child brides is concentrated in South Asia, Western Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. Child brides often miss out on opportunities for schooling and hence opportunities for self-fulfilment and employment.

And, global estimates reveal that 152 million children are involved in child labour, of whom 64 million are girls and 88 million boys. Worldwide, one in ten children is in child labour. Nearly one-third of children in child labour in the age group of 6–14 years do not attend school, which amounts to 36.1 million children in child labour who are out of school.

In addition, because of cost considerations, women and children from families with low incomes are more at risk of not attending or prematurely dropping out from school. There is evidence that children from poorer families are more prone to illness and are undernourished, so families must invest more in their health and care, which cuts their expenditures on education as well as their success rate in school even if they do attend.

Also, expectations related to the gendered division of labour contribute to low participation in education. In the Caribbean region, for example, this division at the household level means that females have less time to take part in either part- or full-time education, regardless of the course-delivery mode.

Another major factor behind gender inequality in education is the lack of adequate sanitation in many schools. Numerous schools do not have separate toilet facilities for girls, for example.

A study by King and Morrissey in 1998 found that many examples used in school textbooks in the Caribbean region portrayed existing social practices that did not challenge gendered inequalities, resulting from the expectation that females and males perform different familial roles. Research on 20 textbooks for History, Geography, and Social Studies courses in the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) curricula, used at the secondary level in Commonwealth Caribbean states, revealed the textbooks to be heavily gender biased. (King & Morrissey, 1988). This is an issue COL has tried to address in supporting new OER content development in this region and others using COL's gender keys and other guidelines.

### **Is open schooling the answer?**

More people can access schooling opportunities regardless of their individual circumstances, including their gender.

Open schools are more open about what to study, when to study, how to study and when and how to be assessed.

Learners in open schools frequently take fewer subjects at any one time, and may stop out at intervals to take care of other issues, before returning to continue their studies. This flexibility can contribute to greater attainment overall.

Open schooling is usually more affordable in terms of fees, textbooks, transport etc. and there is no need for a uniform.

Increasingly, a tablet pre-loaded with interactive digital OER is cheaper and more convenient than supplying printed textbooks.

During the COVID pandemic, COL's OS partners shared the OER they had developed to support out-of-school learning through multiple channels.

If we have access, TEL can help us reach larger numbers as in this example from the national Institute of Open Schooling in India.

However, sometimes we need to make use of more traditional methods such as television or radio broadcasting ...

And sometimes ... the school must go to the girls ... as in this example from Nigeria.

As noted, different approaches are needed in different contexts. And there is always a need to accommodate PWD. The 2011 EFA Global Monitoring Report estimated that 90% of children with disabilities in the developing world did not attend school. The main reasons for learners with disabilities not accessing education or dropping out from school are the absence of the physical infrastructure they require, the lack of even minimal support services, such as special education teachers, and the lack of therapy services. For some PWD, ODL is actually a more supportive environment, allowing them to study from home ...

### **Some practical strategies**

First, we need to understand where the greatest needs are. We cannot do everything all at once, so where can we make the greatest impact? Based on recent research undertaken by COL, our current focus is girls/young mothers/NEETs.

Listen to those affected. In a study about to be published by COL called *Learning pathways for young mothers in Rwanda: Building resilience through identity formation and mentorship*, Respondent 5 put it in this way: "You have helped us to recover our self-esteem and to feel that our lives matter."

It is not one-size-fits-all.

Some of our recent interventions have been:

- Additional resources, Kang Region, Botswana
- Mobile access to curriculum-aligned OER, Masai Mara, Kenya
- Girl-friendly STEM teacher capacity-building, Kenya
- Alternative learning pathways, Tanzania

And we need to monitor to ensure we are on track, evaluate, and then use the evaluation to improve as was the case in this example from Mozambique.

Finally, we need to share our evaluation and practices so that we can learn from one another.

Thank you.