

Educate to Empower



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The Commonwealth of Learning is committed to promoting 'learning for sustainable development' and women's equality and empowerment are central to that vision. COL uses distance learning and technologies to reach the unreached women and girls in developing countries.

While there are many barriers to girls' education, let us look at three and how COL bridges these effectively through innovative approaches.

The first major constraint is resources. A study in Malawi points out "that children aged 6-14 spend the most hours taking care of other children, water collection, cooking, and wood collection". Schooling them involves substantial opportunity costs for the families.

Khadija a young girl from Bangladesh told us 'My father believes that only boys should have an education. He wanted me to get married, but I did not want to destroy my life. Right now, I am continuing my studies at the Open School in Dhaka because I firmly believe that education can change my social position.'

COL believes that open schooling can provide secondary education at scale. Open schools adopt a flexible approach that allows learners to study at their own pace place and time. Distance learning is generally preferred by women and girls as it saves on opportunity costs. The Namibian College of Open Learning enrolls 65% girls because of flexibility and lower costs. NAMCOL costs one fifth of what it costs to put a student through a campus-based secondary school. Another study of a COL-supported open school in Belize shows that every \$ invested has resulted in \$ 8 worth of perceived benefits to the girls. It is for this reason that 27 Commonwealth countries have established open schools.

The second major constraint is the environment. The lack of safe learning spaces, and the biases of various stakeholders including some teachers inhibit the enrollment of girls in the formal school system.

COL in collaboration with UNICEF implemented the Child Friendly School model in Nigeria. This model aims to improve the quality of the learning experience by providing safety and security, sanitation, and child-centered teaching methodologies. The Minister of Education, the Hon Alhaji Adamu Adamu, has announced a partnership with COL to mainstream this model for educating the girl-child.

The third major constraint is society. Poverty and socio-cultural practices have disadvantaged girls in accessing education.

COL trains adolescent girls for livelihoods and focuses on sensitizing the communities and families first. In order to skill 35,000 girls, over 200,000 family and community members were sensitized. In another COL project, the lifelong learning for farmers, we have found a strong relationship between social capital,

and the empowerment of mothers resulting in the increased participation of girls in school. The social capital of the mother is the most important determinant in bringing girls to school.

In conclusion let us consider three policy implications. One, conventional brick and mortar approaches will not bring more girls to school. Open distance and technology based approaches will allow them to study at their own convenience at a fraction of the cost. Two, political will is necessary if we want to ensure that pilot projects like the Child Friendly Schools become mainstreamed for better scale and impact. Three, we need to focus on developing social capital. Empowered mothers and sensitised communities can be the most powerful stakeholders for ensuring that girls not only have access but every opportunity for success.