

Message from the President of COL for IWD 2015

Video Message

International Women's Day 2015

by
Prof. Asha Kanwar
President & CEO
Commonwealth of Learning

The theme for International Women's Day this year is *Make it happen*. This is exactly what COL is trying to achieve—move from ideas to implementation and from commitment to action! By using distance learning and technology, COL reaches out to women and girls with flexible learning opportunities so that they can study at their own pace, place and time while also taking care of their other responsibilities. Let me share five examples of COL's work and the lessons that we've learned.

First, as you know, there are few women at senior executive levels. Through the CEMBA/MPA programme, COL has developed special guidelines for partner institutions to ensure that more women have the opportunity to access this programme and to succeed in it. A study tracking women who took this programme in Jamaica and Guyana shows that more women were able to get promotions and achieve higher levels of responsibility within their organisations, because of this. The lesson here is that a *targeted approach* is important if we want to *make it happen* for women.

Second, COL's book on leadership for women in distance learning and development, which we published last year, draws on the experiences of various women from the Commonwealth who are in the process of becoming leaders; who are established leaders; and who are helping other women to become leaders. The lesson learned is that *sharing the stories* of women's struggle and success can inspire other women to *make it happen*.

Third, COL's work in skills development has brought more women into non-traditional areas such as construction, timber trade, carpentry etc. through the Women in Technology (WITED) chapters in our African partner institutions and the community. WITED chapters have helped to increase girls' and women's participation in TVET, leading to livelihoods. The lesson is that in order to increase women and girls' participation in non-traditional areas, *mobilising the community* is critical.

Fourth, through COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme (L3F) in Kenya, Immaculate Ouma received training in poultry keeping and management. Within two months, she applied for a business start-up loan offered by a community banking cooperative. She used the loan to start a business with 200 birds. And, even though she's never been to a classroom, she is now a

thriving entrepreneur who contributes to her family's income. The lesson here is that when you *empower one woman*, you *make it happen* for the whole family.

Finally, COL's Open Schooling programme, has enabled many women who dropped out of school in Bangladesh to go back to school. One young mother, who had not completed primary school could not help her children with their school work. She got a second chance to study through open schooling and is now able to teach her two young children. When you *educate a woman* you *educate the entire family*.

From these examples, you can see that there's much to celebrate, but there is still much more to achieve. It is not enough to provide learning and skills development without helping to provide opportunities for women to have equitable access to i) resources, such as land, finance, employment, food and ii) a voice in decision-making. We need to take a holistic approach and tackle the social and cultural barriers in order to pave the way for women's empowerment.

Let us take a pledge today to *make it happen*. Happy Women's Day.