



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

GiRLS Inspire

Learning for empowerment.

GiRLS Inspire

**Model for Women's
Empowerment**





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The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by the Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.



Commonwealth of Learning, 2020

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Our Achievements at a Glance

92,426

women and girls
trained in life and
vocational skills



18,320

women and girls in
income-generating
opportunities



14,985

women and girls in
internships



14,336

men and boys trained
in gender equality



507,552

community members
reached



1,181

child marriages
prevented



385

community mentorship
clubs established



10

organisations with improved
organisational capacity to
leverage ODL



About This Brochure

GIRLS Inspire was established as a Commonwealth of Learning (COL) project in partnership with community organisations in Bangladesh, India, Mozambique, Pakistan and Tanzania. Its overall goal is to help women and girls get the education and training they need to become empowered and fulfil their potential. Poverty is one of the top three barriers to accessing education for girls; another is cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality: for example, child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), and allowing boys but not girls to go to school. GIRLS Inspire aims to help vulnerable women and girls overcome such barriers so they can improve not only their own lives but also their family's and community's lives.

Two projects have been covered by the GIRLS Inspire brand to date:

- Reaching the Unreached (RtU) through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan,

funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Australia, and

- Preventing Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) through Open, Distance and Technology-based Education in Bangladesh, Mozambique, Pakistan and Tanzania, funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC).

RtU, a one-year project, was launched in 2016. Its goal was to empower 20,000 women and girls in the most marginalised communities of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan by giving them access to education and vocational training.

The CEFM project, also launched in 2016, was a three-year project. Its multipronged goal was to give 25,000 women and girls in Bangladesh, Mozambique, Pakistan and Tanzania access to education and vocational training, and to empower them and change how their communities think about CEFM in order to prevent child marriages, which entailed raising awareness about gender equality.

We learned a lot from the projects and would like to share what we learned in the form of a model for similar projects. At time of writing, we have already started a women's and girls' empowerment project in a development phase in Malawi that draws on several aspects of this model. We have also embarked on scaling up the RtU project in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, also funded by DFAT Australia, and introduced Sri Lanka to the project in response to a similar gap in training and employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in poor rural communities in the project. The goal is to empower 45,000 women and girls. We are already benefiting from the transferability of the model as we move through the scaling-up process.



We took a participatory, collaborative approach to all aspects of the project to create an enabling, supportive, sustainable environment and reinforce a sense of ownership and accountability, both of which are strong determinants of success. The projects had three pillars — the organisations, communities, women and girls — and we consistently strove to build trust with the partners and all other stakeholders and treat them as equals.



First Steps

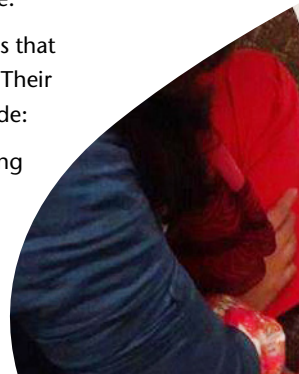
We first designed a Logic Model and Project Management Framework (PMF) to establish a logical sequence for setting out our goals and tracking progress. This framework was supported by the M&E framework.

We also developed a communications strategy early on to support



our branding strategy. The donor agreements identified priority countries for the project, but COL had to find suitable partners in those countries. After we identified potential partners, we created detailed country action plans, budgeted and aligned with the expected results in the project's Logic Model. We started our search for potential partners six months before the project's scheduled launch using the following criteria:

- Within the identified countries partners had to be willing to work in regions that:
 - are geographically vulnerable — for example, they are at serious risk of flash floods and other natural disasters,
 - have high levels of both poverty and CEFM, and
 - lack education and training opportunities for the population as a whole.
- Partners had to be organisations that shared COL's goals and values. Their existing mandates would include:
 - making education and training available to vulnerable populations,



- equipping communities with the skills to deal with global challenges and implement sustainable development practices,
- raising awareness of and working to end violence against women and girls,
- working to empower women and girls, and
- providing support, including technical support, for entrepreneurs and small to medium businesses.

We also looked at partners' previous project experience. Choosing partners with a good track record reduced our risk factor. After the agreements were signed we conducted our risk management via field visits and discussions with the partners, and consultations with the Canadian and Australian High Commission offices in the partner countries, either face-to-face or via Skype.

COL provided prospective partners with a proposal template, which they used to submit detailed proposals, including project work plans and budgets. They had two months to submit



their proposals, which COL assessed via the following criteria:

- Leadership within the partner organisation.
- Success rate of previous projects.
- Budget.
- Responsiveness and capacity of the organisation.

Once a partner's proposal was accepted, we embarked on a round of negotiations to clarify expectations, deliverables, etc., before signing contracts. At the contract stage, each partner was responsible for assigning a:

- project manager,
- M&E Focal Point (M&E FP), and
- Communication Focal Point (CFP).

We worked with the partners to conduct baseline studies among the organisations, women and girls, communities and potential employers to understand the status quo and specific needs of each community. The baseline data were collected in batches, in accordance with a data collection plan, to accommodate different enrolment dates, even within countries.



Project Management and Governance

The GIRLS Inspire project happened concurrently in several countries. We had to accommodate different languages, literacy levels, technical capacities and access, and cultural traditions, all while managing the project from our headquarters in British Columbia, Canada. For any project, but especially a large, complex one like ours, it is crucial to keep accurate, detailed records and document all activities carefully for two reasons in particular: It keeps the project on track (gaps can be identified, proximity to meeting goals can be measured) and ensures adherence to legal and funding requirements, and it creates a solid foundation for longer-term strategies and follow-up interventions, both of which are essential for sustainability.

Partners signed a detailed contract that included:

- work plans that were aligned with the Project Outcomes, but which each partner adapted in accordance with their local culture, language, religion and traditions,

- budgets,
- timelines,
- reporting schedule,
- M&E strategy,
- communication plan, and
- data collection plans and procedures.

Building and expanding the partners' capacity was fundamental to success.

During the project's first three months, we developed Project Guidelines as a self-study guide for partners and which they could refer to if technical issues or time differences hampered direct contact with the project team. They comprised comprehensive project management, M&E, communications and administrative information.

The project managers and M&E FPs received rigorous online and face-to-face training in our project management and communication tools. We also offered ongoing technical and moral support via Basecamp, GoToMeeting and Skype.





Our main project management platforms were Basecamp and Dropbox. The Basecamp account for the two original projects had 11 project groups with a total of 122 group members and allowed project members to communicate and exchange knowledge and information easily and effectively. The Dropbox account stored the evidence of achievements that the partners were contractually required to submit. The evidence was organised according to the PMF and aligned with each partner's work plan. While the results of the project are presented in the various reports we published, the partners and their staff could access only their own Dropbox accounts.

The project had a robust governance structure and was managed from various levels, with the PMF being used as a roadmap. (All committees were established immediately after contracts were signed.)

COL had a project team in its British Columbia offices to implement the project and a steering

committee to advise the team on implementation strategies, review reports to donors, oversee the M&E and overall process, and generally provide support. The steering committee met three times during the project's first six months, and subsequently every quarter, for a total of 11 meetings. The meetings were chaired by COL's President and CEO and attended by the project team.

The partners were part of the Country Steering Committee (CSC), which was chaired by COL's Project Team in Vancouver and involved all the countries taking part in the project, including each partner's CEO and Project Manager. In addition, we had Communications FP and M&E FP committees, which included all the CFPs and M&E FPs and were also chaired by COL. All three committees had monthly meetings with the project team to reflect on progress and challenges, build capacity and discuss ways forward.



All the training interventions and committee meetings were recorded, and partners used them when cascading training to field staff, which included translating information into local languages so that everyone could benefit from the training. The data are stored in accordance with COL's online data policy.

Communication and Community Building

Our communication strategy's key components were branding, our Community of Practice (CoP) and social media. GIRLS Inspire had its own URL separate from the main COL website: <https://girlsinspire.col.org>. The page is still active. The landing page shows snippets from recent blog and social media posts and can be translated into a wide selection of world

languages via GoogleTranslate. Any interested party can access information about the project. Our partners were directly involved in all aspects of our communications strategy.

We knew we had to sell the project by leveraging the women's and girls' stories and showing how it had improved their lives – and the lives of entire communities.

We used a wide variety of communication methods, from the traditional – press releases, local radio and newspaper interviews – to the modern – blogs, social media – to reach as many people as possible. Every year, we drew up a calendar to schedule our communications for maximum impact. For example, we launched the GIRLS Inspire brand, social media platforms, CoP and communications plan on International Women's Day, 2016, and planned



week-long concentrated media campaigns around international observance days and other significant events.

We kept women and girls at the centre of every facet of the branding, consistently emphasised growth and development, strove to respect cultural differences and avoid stereotyping and honoured the diversity of the stakeholders.

Our CoP proved invaluable. Designed and developed in consultation with the partners, whose suggestions ranged from addressing language barriers to positioning it as an access point to other development agencies and experts in the sector, it allowed the partners to collaborate and share useful resources and lessons learned. More crucially, it allowed them to present concrete outcomes via the women's and girls' stories. Reading others' success stories

gave them ideas about how to solve some of their own challenges and offered hope and encouragement. We also used the CoP as a teaching platform by presenting instructional webinars through it.

We recognised we could literally tell the world about our project via social media and spent just under three months preparing our Communication Strategy. Each partner's CFP assessed their team's technical capacity so we could provide the appropriate training and capacity building. We initially spent six months building partners' capacity in, for example,

writing stories and making short videos and social media posts, but we continue to hold regular online capacity-building sessions — CFP Knowledge Exchange sessions — in social media and communications best practices and technology use. We encouraged everyone to contribute posts to the **blog**, and in late July 2019 we introduced an initiative whereby a different partner would post a story on the CoP every week for a consistent flow of fresh information. Cross-promotions helped with brand visibility, and to maximise the variety of resources on our Web page we posted project-related **videos** that we produced with the partners.

We recorded and analysed hits, views, subscriber numbers and interactions on our social media accounts so we could see which strategies were working and where the gaps were and adjust our strategy accordingly.

CEFM and gender equality are sensitive topics in some regions, so we prioritised community building to establish trust with the communities. Team members went from door to door explaining who we were, our goals and our goals' importance not only for the women and girls but also for the entire community. Furthermore, we connected and established relationships with potential employers in each community to help the partners align the training programmes with the needs of the labour market so that the women's and girls' training would actually help them find work.

In a project of this nature, partners have to work with various stakeholders — peer groups, community leaders, the community in general, other organisations, and local and national government officials — to ensure ownership and success.

If there is community support for women's and girls' education and training, the women and girls are less likely to drop out, and the community as a whole will ultimately benefit.

Although involving the broader community was time-consuming, it paid off many times over in terms of raising awareness and changing attitudes. It is equally important to involve government officials at the beginning of a project to have broad support at all levels of society, help with any potential bureaucratic barriers and make legislative change more likely.

Collecting and Managing the Data

Our M&E strategy provided a holistic framework for integrating lessons learned and documenting





progress and successes. We drew on the principles set out in **COL's 2015-2021 Strategic Plan**, used an RBM approach and integrated case studies presenting the lived experiences of the participants. To promote accountability, ownership and sustainability, and maximise the reliability and validity of the data, we involved the partners, women and girls and community members. All our M&E tools were directly relevant to the project's PMF (each question could be directly linked to an outcome or output), culturally sensitive and accessible in the local languages.

M&E was a novel concept for many, including the M&E FPs, who completed a survey, which we used to assess their understanding of M&E and data collection systems within their organisations. We used the survey results to implement a training plan for the M&E FPs to learn to use the tools, develop sampling plans and learn

about ethical issues, such as only posting photographs with permission. Furthermore, we invested significant time in explaining the Theory of Change (ToC) and PMF so that the partners understood not only what to do but also why they were doing it in order to provide valid, reliable data. We checked in regularly for feedback on the tools and to address problems as they arose.

For data collection, we used Survey Gizmo. This Web-based platform allowed data collectors and partners to input data in local languages as well as English in both online and offline situations. Partners working in areas with no Internet connection could input data offline and upload them when they were online. COL's project coordinator subsequently downloaded the data in Excel; the data were analysed and stored in GIRLS Inspire's Data Hub on COL's server.

This project was about people's lives, so we also collected qualitative data. The teams



sent in stories and case studies presenting the women's and girls', communities' and partners' perspectives on the project and how it had affected their lives; video clips of interviews with participants; course materials; and advocacy resources developed and used throughout the project. This gave us a holistic picture of the project's impact: the story the numbers told and the stories the stakeholders told. Stories submitted in local languages were translated into English and identified as translations. The voice of the translations stayed as close as possible to the original so that we honoured the women's and girls' voices.

Measuring Progress

The GIRLS Inspire project aimed to bring education and training to women and girls to empower them to become productive members of society by working; improving their life and literacy skills and knowledge about their social rights; and having decision-making powers at both the family and community level. Our

parallel aims were to raise awareness of the dangers of CEFM, prevent CEFM and spark changes in community attitudes towards this practice. We expect that by achieving these goals, we will also come closer to achieving **SDGs 1–5, 8, 10 and 16**.

We used a combined RBM framework and developmental evaluation approach to measure progress. With RBM, stakeholders must show evidence of outcomes, which increases accountability. Outcomes are separated out from outputs, so changes and achievements are more easily measured. And because this approach lets users not only monitor and report on progress but also integrate lessons learned along the way, less-experienced stakeholders were able to strengthen their skills as the project progressed.

We collected both qualitative and quantitative data, so we triangulated them to give us as comprehensive as possible an understanding of what we had achieved. We had to strike a balance between assessing progress regularly enough to pinpoint and address problems and not analysing the data so frequently that we and the partners became overwhelmed. We therefore carried out a detailed comparative assessment of the achievement of outputs and progress against PMF targets every six months. On the CoP, we posted three months' worth of data in graph form every quarter to give a solid but manageable picture of progress.

The reports to the COL steering committee included information about the project activities for that particular quarter and cumulative

activities and achievements, with data collected from the women and girls, the communities, the employers and potential employers and the partners' staff. We could therefore more accurately determine gaps or weaknesses and emerging problems, and identify if the overall picture was one of generally steady progress. We consistently followed the format of the PMF to present the quarterly results, cumulative results and country-specific results for maximum detail. The end of project evaluation was primarily qualitative, with case studies providing first-hand evidence of the project's real-life impact. We assessed the final qualitative and quantitative results, and collected endline data to compare with our baseline data in baseline–endline reports (one for the **RtU project**, and one for the **CEFM project**) that summarised the project outcomes. Furthermore, we held workshops with the stakeholders in three of the countries to provide additional evidence of the project's achievements, inform lessons learned and identify leading practices for replication and key areas and strategies for sustainability.

A social return on investment (SROI) study offers a more robust analysis of the economic outcomes of this type of project by analysing the value of the project in terms of its wider social, economic and environmental impact. At time of writing we have completed one for the RtU project and are in the process of completing one for the CEFM project.





What We Learned



PREPARATION:

Allow more preparation time

- At the contract preparation phase, we discovered some of our partners had higher budget expectations based on previous collaborations, and some of them were not able to reduce the budget. We consequently had to find replacement partners.
- The contract signing took longer than expected as the terms were both comprehensive and more rigorous than partners had previously experienced, and so we had to invest more time in explaining the terms and processes to ensure everyone involved fully understood the contracts.
- In some countries, NGOs need a No Objection Certificate (NOC) to confirm that the government authorises the project. An NOC can only be issued after the contract is signed, and funds cannot be transferred to the partner until the NOC has been issued. In some cases, it took more than three months for an NOC to come through.



RELATIONSHIPS:

Cultivating relationships at all levels is key to success

- Residents in the areas where we worked were often very conservative and hesitant to participate in any training. By involving community leaders and decision makers, we fostered partnerships, collaboration and trust.
- To overcome resistance to sending women and girls for vocational training, our team's strategy was to conduct extensive field visits, form committees with well-respected members of the community, distribute leaflets and conduct door-to-door visits.
- We reached out directly to men with special sensitisation trainings as a way to sustainably prevent CEFM and work towards changing gender-based attitudes.
- Making policy makers part of a project's plan and integrating a project with existing national government plans helps to foster relationships with government authorities, gain their support for projects and move closer towards achieving sustainable change.



- The partners were contractually obligated to connect the women and girls with employment opportunities. We therefore connected and collaborated with potential employers to ensure that the training we offered reflected labour market needs.



PRIORITISE DATA:

Train partners in collecting high-quality data

- We invested greatly in training the partners in effective data collection and its importance. As the project evolved, they increasingly understood how robust data help the team follow progress and change from start to finish, and how various activities contributed to the outputs and outcomes.



CAPACITY BUILDING OF PARTNERS:

Invest in building partners' capacity to understand their roles and responsibilities and equip them with any additional skills they may need

- We used regular webinars, Skype sessions and teleconferences to facilitate open, consistent communication with all the

project team leaders and members, identify issues and challenges, create bridges for knowledge sharing, and build capacities for continuous improvement in communication, M&E and project implementation.

- Providing training remotely eased the burden on both the environment and the project budget, although it often required the GIRLS Inspire and partner teams to work outside regular office hours to accommodate international time differences.



COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (COP):

Create a place to learn, share and motivate

- The CoP emerged as a place to build the capacity of partners in numerous areas, to share information and to motivate and support the partners.
- Regular CoP meetings in a protected, positive environment allowed members to openly share their experiences, challenges and concerns and collaborate to solve problems. They thus increased their knowledge and enhanced their practice while maintaining energy and enthusiasm at minimal financial cost to the project.



What We Achieved: Snapshots of the impact on women and girls

RUKSANA is a 15-year-old girl from Bangladesh. She is in Grade 7, but when she was 13, she almost dropped out of school to marry someone her parents had chosen. They felt marriage was the best option for her because they could not afford to look after her or keep her in school. Through the GIRLS Inspire project she did not get married at a young age but instead trained as a tailor. After her training she took a loan from the Sonali Bank to open her own business. Initially her father was unhappy about her decision but now he completely supports her. Ruksana has big plans for the future. She hopes to become a teacher, but she also wants to keep learning and to gain new skills to help her support her family.

We believe girls can inspire positive transformation in their families, their communities and in the world.

SUNITA AVGHADE, from Dahiwadi village, India, dropped out of school in Standard Five to help with her family's broom business. The business was not very profitable and the family was poor. When Sunita found out about the GIRLS Inspire project, she enrolled in the entrepreneurship programme and was trained in financial literacy, health and hygiene (both personal and environmental) and tailoring. She started sewing blouses for women and opened a savings account for her earnings with Mann Deshi Bank. This helped her set up a stall where she could sell her blouses and she now has a very successful business. She gained much more than just money from her business, though — she gained confidence in her ability to succeed.



GIRLS Inspire reached the Unreached by bringing education to some of the world's most vulnerable women and girls.

LÚCIA JUMADE lives in Mozambique. She became pregnant at age 15 and her family insisted that she live with the father of her baby, which meant she was forced into an early marriage. When she took part in programmes offered by the GIRLS Inspire project, she found out that early and forced marriages are crimes. Her grandparents, mother and uncle also took part in some of the programmes and learned about the dangers of early marriage. Lúcia later went back to school, and she is sure that her future looks much brighter thanks to everything she learned through the GIRLS Inspire project.



I am thankful my daughter is part of the project. Now she knows how to make batik fabric and soap.



SANA AKBAR is a 22-year-old woman from Pakistan. When she was younger she contracted polio, which left her unable to use one of her legs. Sana has faced various challenges in her life: she has been subjected to mean-spirited comments because of her disability, and she felt she was a burden to her family because she needs help moving around and has not had any marriage proposals. Her family is poor, so even though she completed her matriculation exam, her father could not afford to pay for her to continue her studies.

Sana draws her greatest inspiration from her father, who told her she can do anything she dreams of. When a neighbour told Sana about SPARC's Vocational Training Centre, which offers free training, she approached her parents for permission to enroll in the beautician course.

They were enthusiastic and supportive, and Sana also attended the Life Skill Basic Education (LBSE) classes, which helped improve her personal skills. SPARC provides a safe, peaceful environment for girls, especially those with disabilities, to continue their education and training. The teachers and support staff ensure that the girls feel safe and happy, and that the parents have no reason to worry about their daughters being there.

After her three-month course at the SPARC centre, the SPARC team helped Sana secure an interest-free loan from the Akhowat foundation to start her own home-based business. Sana no longer feels like a burden. These days she is supporting her family with her income and enjoying her independence.



GIRLS Inspire

END OF THE PROJECT MEETING
HOTEL HYATT REGENCY
15-16 FEBRUARY 2019
DAR ES SALAAM - TANZANIA

United Republic of Tanzania



Ministry of Education, Science and Technology



Commonwealth of Canada



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It's essential that there is a connection between the legislative framework, policy formulation and programming to empower women and girls; protect those who have already been married and are now separated or divorced; and advocate an end to the practice of CEFM.

High Commissioner of Canada in Tanzania, Ms Pamela O'Donnell
(February 2019)



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