

Building Back Better: Enabling Women's Leadership



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Excellencies, Colleagues, greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver on this special day when we celebrate both our Commonwealth and women around the world. I would like to thank Dr Ruth Kattumuri, Kemi and her Team for the opportunity to share some examples of how COL empowered women and girls especially during COVID 19.

How do we build back better? By ensuring that girls do not drop out of school, receive skills training for livelihoods and achieve economic empowerment. Addressing the issue of violence against women and girls and the negative impacts of climate change must be central to building back better.

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.

COL has been promoting open schools--a distance learning model of providing secondary education--open schools in India, Bangladesh and Namibia enrol large numbers with a high percentage of girls--65% in Namibia. The Namibian Open school costs one fifth per learner compared to government secondary schools. These open schools remained open during the pandemic and in addition were able to provide their printed course materials to students of regular schools in several countries including Botswana. Because of flexibility and lower costs, open schools can be a viable means of ensuring that the education of girls continues in the post-pandemic period.

Second, skills for livelihoods. COL in partnership with the Coursera Workforce Recovery Programme has offered opportunities for skilling and reskilling 150,000 Commonwealth citizens for employability, 40% of whom are women and girls. Girls from Fatima Jinnah Women's University, Pakistan have successfully completed employment related courses from some of the top universities in the world.

For those who did not have 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. The training, structured as a series of short audio lessons in local languages, have reached more than 10,000 farmers since COVID-19 lockdowns began and offer a solution for reaching the last person in the queue.

Another project in India where COL was training 5000 women face to face in digital skills for entrepreneurship had to pivot to a hybrid model. Most of the women had smartphones and were able to

use video-based calls and webinars, as well as WhatsApp for the training. This was supplemented by in-person sessions where physical distancing was possible.

Third, empowerment. To ensure women's economic empowerment, COL is working in various countries to train them in vocational skills for employment or entrepreneurship. In Malawi COL trained 780 girls in various skills including shoemaking opening up access to employment opportunities and economic independence. COL has developed a holistic model where girls receive technical training as well as training in life skills and financial literacy. They are then linked to employers or financial institutions for loans to start their own businesses.

COL uses a range of technologies to ensure that learning continues even during a crisis. This is very important, especially for women. In a COL study on women farmers in Kenya we found that learning leads to empowerment and for every 1% increase in empowerment there is a 2.3% increase in economic benefits.

Fourth, violence. Working with the National Council for Women, in The Solomon Islands, COL has developed a Mobile App to improve access to and awareness of Social Safety Nets in consultation with communities. The App provides information regarding various services related to education, health and violence.

More awareness and targeted training has led girls to escape child early and forced marriage as we can see from the case of these girls in Bangladesh and Tanzania.

We have seen multiple effects of climate change especially on fragile communities. In such a situation, the first response of any community needs to be based on their own resources, traditional knowledge, and wisdom. Following various consultations and based on the needs identified in The Solomon Islands and PNG, a handbook for partners, 'Learning & sharing for developing community resilience' was developed. This handbook provides guidelines for practicing and sharing traditional processes for food security in communities threatened by climate change, by developing a local and contextual response. The focus is to develop nodal points and facilitators within the community, to identify best practices and local innovations and convert them into learning materials. Women are leading the entire initiative.

In Malawi, COL is building the capacity of women in practical knowledge and skills for sustainable agriculture. Local traditional authorities provided access to land for use by the project team for the training. The women farmers and the agriculture cooperatives were trained in planning, marketing, institutional finance, and small business management. They are also linked with potential buyers for their produce (such as government boarding schools) and other markets as well as with financial institutions.

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.

As a result of this mentorship many girls have found the confidence to speak up and initiate meaningful projects. Lucky Michael of Tanzania has started her own NGO to raise awareness related to climate change. A chapter has been opened to provide mentorship in Gujarat, India. We look forward to supporting more such chapters in the different regions of the Commonwealth. Do reach out to us if this is of interest.

What then is the way forward?

COL's experience shows that building more schools alone will not be enough. We need to empower mothers and communities if we want to ensure that girls return to school. We also need to provide

targeted training to women and girls in digital literacy and advanced ICT skills. We know that political will is essential for the scale and sustainability of a project and we need evidence-based advocacy. If we look back at our mothers and grandmothers, we find that much has been achieved—but many gaps still remain--collaboration and complementing our efforts will be key to enhanced impact. Finally, we need to be more proactive in celebrating women's achievements. Let us empower each other. More empowered women will be critical to building back better.

Thank you.