

# **The Role of civil society in achieving gender parity and equality in across the Commonwealth: A Panel presented by the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat**

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## **Abstract**

The Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat are committed to supporting sustainable inclusive strategies to accelerate progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goal of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015 an achievable prospect. It remains an over-arching Commonwealth concern.

The Issue and the Relevance:

75million children are estimated to be out of school in the Commonwealth who are being denied their right to an education – with the majority being girls. On one hand, combinations of cultural and socio-economic factors have been found to contribute to this disparity. These include:

-The secondary position of women in most patriarchal societies translating itself into viewing of education as not being as important for girls.

-Families favouring boys over girls for entrance into school, especially if access to quality education is not free.

-Increasing obstacles of poverty and related livelihood constraints continuing to keep girls (and boys) in varied labour environments in order to help their families subsist.

On the other hand, school and educational practices, in many cases, fail to promote a change. This happens in more than one ways:

-Girls being exposed to unsafe practices in schools – leading to teenage pregnancy, violence or harassment - preventing girls from continuing their schooling.

-School curriculum and practices promoting gender stereotypes and not geared to change these

-Teachers having stereotyped expectations from boys and girls strengthening rather than questioning the existing practices.

Engagement of civil society organisations is crucial as governments alone cannot address all barriers.

Objectives:

The Panel Discussion is intended to stimulate discussion and debate on identifying the ways in which civil society organisations are contributing towards this goal, further potential that they have and the challenges that they face across the Commonwealth. It will also be an opportunity to debate the limitations and potential of various other ways and means by which girls can be provided access to education and gender equality be promoted for both girls and boys (e.g., components of open and distance learning).

Outputs/outcomes:

-Increased recognition of CSOs as legitimate participants in debates about the direction of the national education programmes

-Increased advocacy and lobbying towards governments, CSOs and international organisations to be accountable for their commitments.

-Increased awareness of progress and setbacks to attainment of the target.

-Greater awareness and consensus on gender equality in education as a critical means for achieving a fundamental human right

-Greater adoption of sustainable strategies and policies which help achieve the MDG goal

Suggested Format and coordination:

The Panel will have five presentations, one from the Commonwealth Secretariat and four by CSOs representing the four developing regions – Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

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