

Gender Equality Today for a Sustainable Tomorrow



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Video Presentation

National Institute of Open Schooling International Women's Day and Inauguration of e-Library "Digital Education and E-Resources Platform" (DEEP)
India

Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Hon Annapurna Devi ji, Minister of State for Education, Prof Saroj Sharma, Chairperson NIOS,
Distinguished Speakers, Colleagues:

It's a pleasure to be virtually present at this high-level event with such inspiring women leaders. The NIOS is a close partner of both the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in Vancouver and our regional office in Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA). As you know, the Commonwealth of Learning, an intergovernmental organisation, helps Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. We believe that access to learning is the key to sustainable development, which means that learning must lead to economic empowerment, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

This links nicely with the theme of this year's International Women's Day: "Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow." The pandemic has highlighted three things: our vulnerability in the face of health and natural disasters, the increasing inequalities within and across nations; the need for economic development without further compromising the future of our people and our planet. A sustainable tomorrow is only possible if these pressing issues are addressed.

Today is International Women's Day, so let us focus on the issue of gender equality. When Commonwealth Heads of Government met for CHOGM in 2018, they resolved to provide 12 years of quality education to each girl in the Commonwealth. Providing girls with an extra year of schooling increases their wages by 10 to 20 per cent. In terms of wages, women receive higher returns to their schooling investment than men (Patrinos, Harry Anthony, 2008, p.59).

Research from the World Bank suggests that providing secondary schooling to girls can eliminate child marriage and lower fertility rates. Because of higher literacy levels among women, the fertility rates in Kerala are well below the national average (Sen, Development as Freedom, 1999, p.199). Population control is a key step towards a sustainable tomorrow.

According to UNESCO estimates, around the world, 129 million girls are out of school, including 97 million of secondary school age (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation#1>)

As we know, it will not be possible for most governments to provide additional brick-and-mortar schools to accommodate the large numbers of girls who need education. Open schools become a viable option

because they increase access, decrease costs, and enhance the quality of education - all with a lower carbon footprint.

COL conducted a study on the NIOS and Namibian College of Open Learning and found that both open schools had increased access to secondary schooling for tens of thousands, especially girls who would otherwise not have the opportunity. Interestingly, the study found that putting a learner through an open school in India costs one tenth of what it takes to put a student through a government supported secondary school.

In several Commonwealth countries, the cost-effectiveness and flexibility of open schools make it particularly attractive for women and girls. 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."

In crisis situations girls' education becomes a major casualty. Experts estimate that on account of the pandemic 11 million girls are not likely to return to school. How will we ensure that girls get back into school? In another project, COL trains adolescent girls for livelihoods in five countries but this is only possible by first sensitising the communities and the families. In fact, the COL experience shows that empowered mothers are the most important determinant in bringing girls to school. Using its national network, NIOS is in a unique position to mobilise communities and empower mothers across the country to ensure that more girls are supported to complete secondary schooling.

As we know from the Chipko movement, women and girls can play a key role in mitigating the negative impacts of climate change. More girls must be encouraged to opt for STEM subjects and develop skills for green jobs. In addition, NIOS can integrate climate literacy into the curriculum across disciplines. If all 1.3 million NIOS students changed their behaviours and became champions of environmental conservation, think of the difference it would make to reducing the carbon footprint of the country.

I believe open schools have a leadership role to play in ensuring that each girl has access to 12 years of quality education that inculcates sustainable behaviours. Let me conclude by modifying the slogan 'beti padhao, beti bachao' to 'beti padhao paryavaran bachao'.