

Human Capital Development: Lessons from COL



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Excellencies, Colleagues, let me say what a pleasure it is to meet again in person after all this time. I would like to thank Carina Kabajunga and her team from the Commonwealth Secretariat for bringing us together to discuss how we can develop the human capital of women and girls in and through technologies. Let me set the context by looking specifically at the experience of the Commonwealth of Learning and share the lessons learned.

As you know, COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver for CHOGM 1987. Ever since, our headquarters have been in beautiful British Columbia. We also have a regional office for Asia in New Delhi.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. Women's equality and empowerment are central to this vision.

Our strategy is to harness the potential of existing and new technologies to achieve development outcomes.

How does COL address the issue of human capital development for women and girls? By ensuring that girls do not drop out of school, receive skills training for livelihoods and achieve economic empowerment. These initiatives must be complemented with addressing issues of violence against women and girls and promoting leadership skills.

First, education. Millions of girls are in danger of dropping out of school. 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.

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. Atia, a 22-year-old from Bangladesh was married early and has three children and when she could not help them with their schoolwork, decided to enrol in an open school.

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

Martine Benemariya, a mother two from Rwanda was struggling to keep her digital and online business afloat. As a result of participation in this project, her customer base and revenues have increased and she is now able to help train others including persons with disabilities.

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. MobiMOOCs blends the features of Internet technology with a delivery system via phone to provide an opportunity to scale learning. The training, structured as a series of short audio lessons in local languages, have reached more than 10,000 women farmers since COVID-19 lockdowns began.

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.

Another project in India where COL was training 5000 women in digital skills for entrepreneurship had to pivot to a hybrid model during the pandemic. Most of the women had smartphones and were able to use video-based calls and webinars, as well as WhatsApp to continue with the training. This was supplemented by in-person sessions where physical distancing was possible.

COL supported a course on 'Barefoot Wireless Engineers' designed for young women in rural areas to manage and operate wireless networks and train others to develop a pool of wireless trainers across India.

COL's Girls Inspire is working in ten countries to train girls in vocational skills for employment or entrepreneurship. This holistic approach provides training in technical skills, life skills, financial literacy and ICTs. During the training, participants are linked to employers and financial institutions for livelihoods opportunities.

One success story of e-commerce is Kosala from Sri Lanka, who established an online platform with ten other trainees and has started receiving online orders both locally and from abroad.

A study of this Girls Inspire project found that the likelihood of being employed increased by 50 percent after the training. There was a fivefold increase in income as compared to the start of the project. This study also concluded that there was a 10% increase in female decision-making in the family.

Incidents of gender-based violence increased during the pandemic. 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. The App provides information regarding various services related to education, health and violence.

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.

What have we learnt? A holistic approach to human development requires three stakeholder groups/systems to work in an integrated manner: the school, the family and the community and the learner.

The conventional formal education focuses mostly on the school and the student. The emphasis on the family and community has been limited. When parents and communities are empowered to become effective partners in girls' education, performance in schools improves dramatically. Home-based parental involvement is positively associated with the academic performance of children. A mother in Kenya says, 'How will I help my child who needs my help yet I don't know how to read?' In 2020, the National Children's Summit in Rwanda emphasized the need for training illiterate parents in ICTs. Realising the importance of parents and the community, COL is supporting parental learning in northern Ghana.

At present human capital approaches focus more on formal education with less emphasis on non-formal and informal learning. The COL experience shows that human capital development must be placed along the spectrum of lifelong learning with a focus on skilling, reskilling and upskilling.

While huge efforts have been made to strengthen the ICT skills of women, they have not yielded expected results. One reason could be the lack of life skills and the second could be inadequate attention to the domestication of technology.

There are four phases in the domestication process: appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion. (Dierdre, 2007, Silverstone et al, 1992). Acquiring skills and adopting technologies may not automatically lead to empowering women. Technology and skills are not merely "trickled down" or diffused, but are socially shaped according to different social contexts. Domestication refers to the process of how skills and innovations, are "tamed" by the users.

Conventional approaches to skills development programmes perceive women as passive users while the domestication approach calls for a deeper understanding of how technologies are created, adopted, and used by women and how this changes over time. For example, in certain cultures betel nut bags are considered something specific to women that men and children would rarely touch. Women found that if mobile phones were kept in the betel nut bags, they would be safe. As such the use of technology involves social processes and learning to make the technology work. In addition to ICT skills and Life skills, women also require domestication skills, to enable them to become active partners rather than passive users in the digital economy.

Let's conclude with some key questions:

Are ICT skills enough to empower women to play a major role in the digital economy?

How far have we succeeded in enhancing access to educational opportunities for women in ICT and STEM?

Is the ICT sector gender insensitive: If so, how can it be corrected?