

PCF8 Keynote Address: Access and Inclusion



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Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka
UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women

[As delivered]

President of the Commonwealth of Learning and Leadership,

Ministers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am truly honoured to be at this Eighth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning to learn more about access and inclusion in open, online and flexible learning. I am saying ‘to learn’ because I do not spend as much time in this sector as I would like to. Coming to a gathering like this is a kind of a renewal for me, and it has truly been wonderful to interact with colleagues in the last two days.

Before working for UN Women, I was involved with studying the options at our disposal for technology-enhanced learning that could assist with the provision of teacher education, both for pre-service and in-service training, and which could provide online distance learning for teachers in remote areas.

I was also interested in how teachers in resource-poor environments could have an option for technology-assisted lifelong learning, as well as use technology as teaching support. Further, I wanted to understand how teachers can enable their students to access online learning through the use of mobile technology, which offers opportunities to both learners and teachers.

What was very interesting in that experience was the extent to which the teachers were being taught by the students how to use technology, and how the teachers taught the learners how to use their mobile phones to learn, in addition to the other things that students enjoy when they use their mobile technology.

This experience opened my eyes to the many possibilities offered by these technologies. I saw how discriminatory practices work against women and girls when it came to both access and use of technology, as well as the fact that these problems were not insurmountable.

I also learned that teachers were not early adopters of technology and that they needed a convincing reason to enter into the world of technology and online learning. Therefore it was important to couple teacher training and use of technology with the subject matter.

That journey led me to open, online and flexible learning—a key tool for improving education for many of the groups that are most likely to be left behind unless we take strategic steps. These include teachers and students in under-resourced communities; the working poor in different parts of the world where

there is no infrastructure; women and girls; those who live in rural areas; migrants; and those who are in areas where there is war and conflict.

For all these constituencies, the solutions are so far away and yet so close—in the sense that the solutions already exist; however, it will take coordination in our delivery and our interventions for us to be able to respond to their needs.

I am proud to see the work that the Commonwealth of Learning is doing, which closes this gap. The challenges I am talking about also include: inadequate policy and practice in most of the countries that need these interventions; limited resources, even though the cost of not taking action is even higher; the need for partnerships that enable a coordinated response and the possibility to leverage each other's strengths to achieve scale and impact; and the existence of an ecosystem that uses the capabilities of local, national and international stakeholders.

This also enables us to tap into blended learning that would include the use of technology as well as face-to-face contact, and in the process also tap into the positive culture that is present in the environment where the technical learners would be.

I would like to highlight some of the critical constituencies to which we have to pay attention when we discuss access and inclusion.

I want to start by highlighting the fact that inclusion is exactly what the Sustainable Development Goals are about. They are about leaving no one behind. They are about looking at those that are the last in line, at the back of the queue, and those that are invisible. And therefore, when we talk about access and inclusion, it has to be from the perspective of those that are at risk of being left behind.

Many of our young people are in the constituencies and the communities that are at greatest risk of being left behind. Even when they go to school, they can be at risk of not being educated. Those who are in communities where they are exposed to cultural practices such as early marriage are also likely to lose an opportunity for much needed education. Because this happens at a very young age, they need us to bring them back into the mainstream, to facilitate access, and to ensure that they are included.

This means that we have to address the need for delivery modes that are relevant for these constituencies. We have to think about the cost to the end user. We have to make sure that they impact the non- classical student who needs different pathways.

In the UN system, UN Women, UNFPA, and UNESCO are engaged in a joint programme to reach millions of girls who are in need of second chances. The search for the right means to reach these women and girls has brought us together with the Commonwealth of Learning. Together, we are forging a partnership that I hope will make it possible for us within the UN system to share our skills, our resources and our insights in a manner that will give our joint initiatives impact among the Member States of the Commonwealth and beyond.

Over the years, I have closely followed this forum. The need for governments and academic institutions to recognize the limitations of classroom based learning has become increasingly obvious.

It was refreshing to recall that we spoke on activating the potential and power of open, online and flexible learning to lead the world's education and skills' needs, the skills of tomorrow and to impact people's lives. Those whom we do not want to leave behind, need open, online, offline resources as well as flexibility. The women and girls who need protection from families, who may deny them access to education, also require the possibility to learn for themselves, and also to bring their families along with them.

Most countries do not have policies to track girls when they disappear from school. Most countries also do not have policies that help girls go back to school when they become mothers at a young age. Our request for access and inclusion means we must also think about these young people.

There are 17 Sustainable Development Goals that we have adopted. In each of these Goals, women and girls are at the centre. If you think about SDG 1 and 2, focusing on poverty and hunger, the implementation of these SDGs has a positive impact on women and girls. If you think about SDG 3 on health, this SDG has a positive impact on women and girls and their families, as it is meant to promote healthy lifestyles. SDG 4 on education, which I know you know very well, is significant for its possibility to facilitate access to education, improve equality and ensure that girls will be able to have a fighting chance in life. Sixty-three per cent of the world's illiterates are women, therefore access to education for women throughout their lives is also important for UN Women and it is an important aspect of the SDGs.

The 17 Goals are also meant to provide a mechanism through which different institutions work in partnership. Goal 5, which focuses on gender equality, is not just the responsibility of UN Women in the context of the United Nations. It addresses issues that are of significant interest to many other stakeholders, within and beyond the UN system.

Another important aspect of the Sustainable Development Goals is their universality. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs apply in all countries of the world. Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs also are meant to address challenges within countries and between countries, and of course a major part of the SDGs is that gender is front and centre.

The SDGs also have targets and indicators that facilitate accountability and ensure that we can measure the progress that we make. The process of devising the SDGs was consultative so there is much broader ownership. That is why we ended up with 17 goals, because everybody had a say.

There is a greater emphasis on rights and on ending recurrent transgressions.

In the case of climate change, the emphasis is on ushering in a low-carbon economy, which is progressively enforceable and which will enable us to measure countries' direction in addressing the issue of climate change. When the Paris Agreement is being fully implemented, it should lead to a completely new world in where our lives change: the way we live, the way we spend and the way we consume.

In Goal 5, the focus is on removing major sources of sustained gender inequality that can lead directly to substantive equality for millions of women, and less directly to their families. It is informed by the lessons we have learned from implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, from implementing the MDGs, and from the work on the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The thrust of the focus areas of Goal 5 are therefore informed by experience, by evidence and by data. I must at the same time say that 80 per cent of the indicators of the data that we need in order for us to successfully track the implementation of Goal 5 do not exist yet. The issue of creating an architecture to collect data is very important, so that the implementation of Goal 5 can be appropriately measured.

Goal 5 focuses on removing laws that discriminate against women, and it addresses the cultural practices and stereotypes that work against the good laws once the laws have been passed. Discriminatory practices continue, even in countries where equality is enshrined in legislation. For instance, countries with constitutions that have enshrined equality still have wage inequality. In the implementation of this SDG, we will be trying to bridge this gap, while at the same time, addressing the more than 100 countries which still have legislation in their statutes that discriminates against women and girls.

Goal 5 also addresses unpaid care work, which holds back millions of women from ever fulfilling their potential. It also addresses what the ILO calls the “motherhood penalty”, because many mothers are unable to take full advantage of educational opportunities and work opportunities because of motherhood related commitments.

Goal 5 also focuses on participation and decision-making. Again, this is a challenge that we see in many countries, in politics and in the economy. In fact, we have seen a decline of women who are participating in leadership positions. Among Fortune 500 companies, in the last year, in spite of new positions opening, not even one single woman was appointed.

Goal 5 also focuses on sexual and reproductive health and rights, which is important because without access to reproductive health services, women and girls end up with unwanted pregnancies. In addition, the denial of their rights in relation to reproductive health and sexual rights may lead to significant exploitation of women and girls.

Goal 5 focuses on rights to economic resources and participation at all levels. Inadequate presence of women in places of economic decision-making means that it could take us as long as 170 years to reach equality in economic participation. So in the implementation of these 17 Goals, the focus on Goal 5 is meant to stop us from taking this length of time to obtain gender equality.

In relation to women’s economic empowerment, for instance, education for young people and mid-career workers is important. But I want to emphasize the importance of access to education for women in the informal sector. Because women’s economic empowerment will truly make a difference when women in the market are empowered and women’s economic empowerment is bottom-up.

The scale of the numbers of women in the informal sector makes their case compelling because they are the majority of the working poor. They are 70 per cent of women who work outside the home, and I think they are likely to be very good candidates for open, online and offline education. They are organized, they are also responsible, and they act as shock absorbers of poverty in their economies. Their lives are anything but predictable, but a flexible education can really meet their needs. Their needs are those of market women, of traders, of women who go in search of better lives. They are the pillars of society whose sustainable exit out of poverty can be game-changing for many nations. When I think about access and inclusion, this large constituency is critical.

Informal work is unprotected work. In India, 122 million women who work outside the home, work in the informal sector. Sixty per cent of women who work outside the home in Mexico are in the informal sector. This sector is too big to fail, and therefore our investment in education becomes important.

Let us move to another focus of Goal 5, which are the harmful practices against women and girls, in particular, Female Genital Mutilation and child marriage. These are meant to be a key focus so that by 2030, we will have ended these practices. There are 700 million women alive today who were married before they were 18 years old, whose lives we cannot give up on. By 2050, there will be 1.2 billion women who will have been married as children, unless we turn the tide, and education is a key deterrent in ending child marriage.

There are also 150 million men who were married as children. These women, girls, men and boys need to acquire skills to regain their freedom. Some may even still want to be integrated into the school system. Some may want to enhance their fitness for the job market and some may want to become entrepreneurs. They cannot do conventional education. And we know that education is still one of the best—if not the only—sustainable deterrents of early marriage.

In countries where child marriage is rife, we need your creative ways to target those girls, who through education can prevent or escape these unions. Open and targeted online and offline education could be important as an intervening mechanism.

Women of all ages live with violence. Ending violence against women is also a focus area of Goal 5. Let me remind you also that this week, beginning the 25 November to 10 December, every year we observe 16 Days of Activism to end violence against women. I hope that some of you when you go back home will still have an opportunity to participate in the activities of your country. It has been a privilege for me to participate in the campaign activities while I have been here in Malaysia.

Violence against women was highlighted in the Beijing Platform for Action. We did not highlight it in the MDGs. And in the intervening period, we have seen a significant increase. WHO calls it a public health crisis, as one out of three women lives with violence.

In 2012, almost 50 per cent of women who were victims of homicide were killed by their intimate partners. Many women are trapped in these unions because of their inability to fend for themselves. Education for these women is also critical to give them choices and options and to take them out of harm's way.

Gender-based violence costs the world 2 per cent of global GDP, which is US\$1.5 trillion. It is also one of the worst form of violations of rights. Access to education can make some contribution and turn victims into survivors. But even more importantly, our education systems need to teach gender equality and engage men and boys in positive masculinity so that this abusive behaviour can be prevented.

Education has a critical role to play: including formal education, flexible education, online education. All forms are critical to address this scourge that we see in our society. Our movement at UN Women, HeForShe, attempts to engage men and boys so that they can be turned into defenders of the rights of their society for women and of children. We are focused on prevention, including through addressing the social norms that condone violence against women.

We also have Goal 16 on justice, peace and inclusive societies and communities, which is crucial for communities that live in conflict and are at war.

Let me congratulate you, as Commonwealth countries, for largely being countries at peace. Your responsibility is therefore to lead the world because you have the space to do some of the things that are impossible when you are seized with war.

The SDGs that are focusing on peace are important for those affected by conflict but also for all of us. Lack of peace in Syria is lack of peace everywhere in the world.

Through open, online and flexible learning, we can target women, girls and boys, and men who are affected by war, whose futures are uncertain and who are on the move. Think of the Yazidi women in Iraq, the Syrian refugees, and the youth in Somalia whose lives are so fluid. Access to flexible education could mean that they could incrementally improve their lives.

Many young people will grow into adulthood without ever experiencing peace. They have limited choices in almost everything in their lives. They are a critical group for access and inclusion that we must not leave behind. They are at risk of losing their lives, but also at risk of being recruited by extremist groups.

Even in peaceful areas, most of those who are out of primary and secondary schools are girls. In conflict areas, the situation is even worse.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that you are seeing the story that I am trying to weave about the number of people in our society who can be invisible but whose lives can be intrinsically turned around by the actions that we take, and by our decisions to ensure that the work that we do through open, online and flexible learning benefits and includes them.

I also want to highlight the fact that distance learning has come a long way. Now it is access, not distance, which is the issue. Our collaboration ensures that not only are we able to celebrate the closing of distance, but we are able to make access more possible for those who need it.

We have continuously built an ecosystem that can be referred to as open, online, offline, flexible, multi-access and massive. MOOCs must go beyond streaming for those in a stable education pipeline and also find those who are in pre-tertiary institutions with lives that are unstructured. It must accommodate the need, circumstances and preferences of these learners.

This will prepare women and girls also who are mothers at a young age, who are workers, breadwinners and single parents. The SDGs that we have adopted emphasize how these groups must be targeted.

The 17 Goals, as I have indicated, are mutually reinforcing. Education, just like gender, cuts across the Goals because in every aspect, in every area of these Goals, there is an opportunity to learn and to so improve the impact of the Goals on these constituencies that may be left behind.

The education sector worked very hard for the MDGs, and made great strides. You are in the great position to take full advantage of the SDGs and to assist us to implement the SDGs in a manner that will ensure the deepening of the quality of both learning and teaching.

Online learning platforms, such as Coursera, Khan Academy and Udacity have already changed the landscape of education and learning to enable us to reach the 21st century. They especially ensure that even those who are not trained in producing content can be influential in what is produced for them.

UN Women would like to be part of this journey. We are developing a Virtual Skills School to bring open, online and flexible education to girls and women who often have limited opportunities. The Virtual Skills Schools will deliver quality learning programmes to support women and girls in overcoming physical, financial and other barriers.

The school illustrates our vision for expanding access and especially at pre-tertiary levels. Again, I want to thank the Commonwealth of Learning for agreeing to work with us and to expose us to the experiences that they have had and the considerable learnings that they have amassed in this area.

In conclusion, we also must remain seized with collecting data and sharing the evidence. As we do this work we would like to collaborate with you on our new programme, which is a private- public sector initiative called Making Every Woman and Girl Count. Through this initiative, as we implement this activity in online learning, we will also be collecting data that will give us an idea of what girls want to learn, how they want to learn and what difference our initiatives are making.

We look forward to collaborating with many of you. But more than anything else, we look forward to implementing all of the Goals and ensuring that we remain in partnership, so that in 2030, we can truly obtain substantive equality.

Thank you.