

President's Message for International Women's Day 2020



8 March 2020

Vancouver, Canada

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

Greetings to everyone from the Commonwealth of Learning on International Women's Day!

The theme this year is I am Generation Equality: Realising Women's Rights—this year also marks the 25th anniversary of the 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing. While we can celebrate the achievements and successes of women on this day, we are far from equal in closing the gender divide. The theme this year encourages us to renew our commitment to promoting women's rights for a more gender equal world. What are the gaps that still prevent us from achieving women's rights? There is a wide gap in political participation, women still lack economic opportunities, access to better health and opportunities for education.

My organization the Commonwealth of Learning promotes learning for sustainable development through the use of distance learning and technologies so let me focus on how we can increase educational attainment. Even today, 137 million children and adolescents in the Commonwealth are not in primary or secondary school, 67 million of them are girls and young women. How can we ensure that all girls get 12 years of quality education?

COL believes that if the girl cannot go to school, let the school come to the girl. We promote the use of open schooling to increase access to secondary education. Open schooling uses a flexible approach which allows learners to study at their own pace, place and time. It is an affordable model, which costs about one fifth as compared to conventional secondary education.

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 because I firmly believe that education can change my social position.' Khadija's father was ready to accept this arrangement where she could study from home. In many countries, open schools are particularly attractive for girls. The Namibian College of Open Learning enrolls 65% girls because of flexibility and lower costs. Girls with disabilities are even more disadvantaged—open schools with their use of technology provide an opportunity for these girls to access education at their own convenience. Open schooling is a model that works and needs to be implemented by more ministries and institutions in the Commonwealth to reach the 67 million unreached girls and young women.

But to get more girls into school, we need to empower the mothers first. Samina, a mother from Pakistan, recounts how she was forced to labour as a child rather than go to school but now that she understands the benefits of education through community advocacy, she is empowered to take a stand and send her daughter to school.

Open schooling is a tried and tested model that can be deployed successfully to increase access, improve quality and cut the costs of secondary education. Surprisingly this has not been taken seriously by many Commonwealth member states. The National Institute of Open Schooling in India is a thriving open school with a cumulative enrolment of over 2.7 million with about 30% being girls. Nigeria is in the process of establishing open schooling with implications for hundreds of thousands of girls. More countries must come forward to learn from these examples.

As we celebrate International women's day, let us resolve to invest in innovations and alternative approaches such as open schools to truly realise the rights of our women and girls. Happy International Women's Day!