

# Inspiring Change

## Video Message

**International Women's Day  
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by

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Women in Commonwealth countries face three broad challenges: Poverty, Disempowerment and Poor Health. Two thirds of women in the Commonwealth live under US\$2 a day.[\[1\]](#) Their productive role is constrained by lack of access and control over resources such as land, labour, capital organisation and knowledge. Poverty and disempowerment have a direct impact on women's health. The 9<sup>th</sup> Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting in Barbados, pointed out that 66 out of the 100 deaths due to complications in pregnancy and child birth take place in Commonwealth countries and women account for 60% of those affected by HIV/AIDS in the Commonwealth. Violence against women remains a critical issue affecting women's empowerment and needs priority attention.

Gender equality is one of the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth. An increasing number of governments are realising the value of investing in gender equality and improving the status of women.

Most of the female heads of government in the Commonwealth, who are themselves powerful role models for girls and women, have spoken of education and learning as a means of empowering women and girls.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) recognises that in order to give meaning to its agenda of "learning for development", gender equality and women's empowerment has to be integral to its work around the globe. COL believes that learning and knowledge are the key to individual freedom and to social and economic development. The link between women's empowerment and development effectiveness has been clearly established. As Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations said '*It is impossible to realise our goals while discriminating against half the human race*'.

COL is an intergovernmental agency created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. COL's purpose is to increase access to quality learning opportunities so that Commonwealth citizens, particularly women and girls, have the knowledge and skills to lead healthy and productive lives. The theme of International Women's Day this year is 'Inspiring Change'. While we celebrate the economic, political and social achievements of women, this is also an opportunity for us inspiring positive change. The Commonwealth of

Learning is doing its part in contributing to gender equality through the use of distance education and appropriate technologies.

Let me share some of the inspiring success stories from around the Commonwealth.

1. Through COL's support, Eunice, a young woman from Kenya, was able to fulfil her dream of becoming a construction worker, like her father by attending a training programme at the Coast Institute of Technology. This enabled her to increase her income substantially which meant that she could contribute to her family income and support her own further training in this field. Many girls like Eunice are benefitting from flexible skills development training. Many girls like Shahnaz benefit from distance learning because it's both affordable and flexible.
2. Periya, an illiterate woman from a poor household in India learned about the modern techniques in goat rearing through the COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative. Using mobile phones and blended learning methods, she along with other members of a microfinance group learned about business and credit planning, approached a bank for a loan and started an enterprise. She is now an active member of a women's federation, has started a primary school in the village and is a committee member managing the school. Her personal income through goat rearing has increased considerably. She is not only able to learn daily through her mobile phone and other media such as TV and radio but also shares her experiences with thousands of other women using these media.
3. Hilda and 12 other women in Malawi are sitting around the radio under a baobab tree. They are listening to a radio programme on maternal health from the Community Radio Station facilitated by COL. Two years ago Hilda's sister died while giving birth because she had no professional support and did not make it to the hospital in time. Hilda got a group of women together who wanted to do something about the high level of maternal mortality in the area. With COL support, they developed radio programmes on issues related to pregnancy and delivery. Hilda smiles when in the middle of the programme, songs on pregnancy and childbirth are aired. Hilda's group wrote and performed these songs – they are listening to their own voices, their own stories and ideas. These radio programmes have had a major impact on the health-seeking behaviours of the community.

These are the stories of some women who have changed their own lives and inspired others to do likewise. Let us continue to inspire change, not just by bringing about greater awareness of gender equality, but also by continuing to support positive action for girl's and women's advancement through education and learning. Achieving gender equality is not just the responsibility of women alone. It must be the common concern for all humanity. Each one of us must contribute and as Mahatma Gandhi said: 'Let us be the change we want to see'.