The Commonwealth of Learning

Delivering by Distance

Established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has the notable distinction of being the only intergovernmental organisation that contributes to development by providing governments with the requisite technical assistance to expand their education and training systems using open and distance learning approaches.

Open and distance learning methodologies offer a range of non-traditional measures and methods that can be implemented to address the challenges faced by developing countries grappling with issues such as extreme poverty, lack of educational and economic opportunities for females, and male underachievement.

The difficulties that females still encounter when trying to access conventional education systems and the resulting negative social and economic impact, continue to justify the prominent position that gender issues occupy on the development agenda of COL. The more recently acknowledged phenomenon of boys' underachievement in education in some Commonwealth countries and territories, has served to further highlight the need for COL to incorporate gender sensitivity into its programmes and to undertake projects that have a direct impact on the education and livelihood of marginalised males and females.

The following is a summary of the gender-related projects and programmes implemented by COL since 1995, as well as a brief account of forthcoming projects and programmes.

Management of Small Enterprise Skills Training for Rural Women (Bangladesh) 1997/98

In partnership with the Bangladesh Open University, CSOs and government organisations in Bangladesh, COL developed and delivered a non-formal education programme aimed at equipping trainers with the skills to develop management and entrepreneurial skills among rural businesswomen. The programme comprised the following five courses: Entrepreneurial Skills for Development; Management of Small Businesses; Planning and Strategic Management; Money Management and Dimensions of a Rural Small Enterprise.

During the course, trainee trainers were expected to deliver the training module to rural women engaged in the management of small enterprises, indirectly assisting with poverty eradication, human development and employment generation.

Media Development for Women in Agro-Food Processing (Ghana) 1999

COL provided training to extension officers of the Women in Agro-food Development (WIAD) Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture in Ghana, to equip them with the requisite skills in video production. The videos were used by the extension officers to expose women in both rural and urban areas to new techniques in agro-food processing and marketing. Additional outputs associated with this project were the establishment of a video production unit at WIAD and archiving of agro-food data using video.

Workshops to Identify Barriers Encountered by Women in the Use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) for Open and Distance Learning

In November 1998, COL convened an Asian regional meeting of experts involved in gender issues, open and distance education and information and communications technologies. The meeting, which was held in India, was the first in a series of regional meetings focusing on new information and communications technologies, and the opportunities and challenges they create for women in education.

Subsequent meetings were held in

Barbados in November 1999 and in Tanzania in March 2000 for experts from the Commonwealth Caribbean and Commonwealth African countries respectively. The final meeting was held in New Zealand in May 2001 for the countries of the Commonwealth Pacific.

The country reports produced for presentation at these workshops identified the extent of open and distance learning provision, the barriers to women's participation, possible strategies that could be employed to overcome the identified barriers and the possible influence and effect of communications policies on women's participation in the use of information and communication technologies.

Development of a Gender Mainstreaming Training Resources Database

In November,1999, COL, in partnership with the UN Inter-Agency Committee on Women and Gender Equality (IACWGE), initiated the establishment of a global electronic database and Internet network for gender-related training materials, to support capacity-building for gender mainstreaming and women's equality issues within the UN system and the Commonwealth.

The IACWGE, a steering committee comprising representatives from UNDP, UNICEF and UNIFEM, provided funding for the development of the database and COL provided the technical expertise. COL also invited the Commonwealth Secretariat to include its extensive gender mainstreaming publications in the database. The prototype was launched at the Special Session of the General Assembly for the Beijing +5 Review held at the UN in New York in June 2000.

Implementing Core Labour Standards through Management Training in the Bangladesh Ready-made Garment Sector

In November 2000, COL, in collaboration with OXFAM and The Prince of Wales International Business Leaders Forum, designed and produced learning materials for a pilot project, with a view to improving the working conditions of garment workers, by building the capacity of management to understand the need for and to be able to implement change.

The pilot project was a direct response to research conducted by OXFAM (Bangladesh) in 1999 which indicated that low management capacity amongst female garment workers was a major obstacle to implementing change within an industry that employs approximately 1.5 million people (mainly women).

Forum on ICTs and Gender (Malaysia) 2003

In August 2003, COL participated in the International Forum on ICTs and Gender in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The event, which was organised by the Government of Malaysia, ITU, Global Knowledge Partnership, UNESCO and supported by CIDA, attracted some 300 delegates from around the world.

The purpose of the meeting was to foster a greater appreciation of the gender-related barriers that exist in developing and developed countries, develop an understanding of why women need access to ICTs and to discuss strategies for overcoming these barriers.

Publication of a Gender Management System (GMS) Tool Kit 2002–2004

COL partnered the Commonwealth Secretariat, to develop the GMS Toolkit to assist policy-makers and other stakeholders with gender analysis, policy-making, planning and programme implementation. The Toolkit is being distributed at no cost to relevant government and non-governmental organisations in developing Commonwealth countries.

Beyond 2004

COL will continue to focus attention on facilitating the efforts of developing country governments to expand access to learning and education for females, by providing technical assistance to facilitate the implementation and use of non-traditional technologies and resources. Attention will also be given to the underachievement of boys in education.

In an effort to support practitioners working for gender equality, the Commonwealth of Learning has entered into a joint initiative with the Forum for African Women Educationalists to create a virtual library of gender resources. This internet-based resource will provide all the full-text documents in the field that are available electronically.