

# COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION BRIEFING NOTES

Prepared by the Commonwealth Consortium for Education

A grouping of voluntary and professional bodies committed to education development in the Commonwealth

## No. 6. GENDER AND EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH

### Introduction

Commonwealth Governments are committed to achieving gender equality and parity in education through provision of entitlement, opportunity and capacity for **both girls and boys** belonging to diverse social, ethnic, linguistic or economic groups.

This paper will focus on Gender and Education in the Commonwealth with particular emphasis on the importance of educating girls and women; Commonwealth interventions to work towards attaining the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on gender equality in schools on the part of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the Commonwealth Foundation; the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan; Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU); and the Commonwealth Countries League Education Fund.

### 1. The importance of the education of girls and women

One may ask why girls' education is still the central focus today when we speak about gender in education. The facts and figures (DFID report 2005) indicate that:

- There are approximately 100 million school-age children worldwide who are not in school. Of these, 55 per cent are girls.
- Out of roughly 800 million people aged 15 and above living without basic literacy skills world wide, 64 percent are women.
- Of 180 countries that have been monitoring progress towards gender parity, 76 have not yet achieved equal numbers of girls and boys in primary school, and the gender disparities are nearly always at the expense of girls.
- In some countries, girls outperform boys in school, but later fail to gain equality in work or political participation. In the poorest countries it is girls who face barriers to equality of opportunity, and do not achieve equal outcomes from education.

Key facts cited in the Education For All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report for 2005 include the following:

- Of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty around the world, 70% are women. (*World Revolution*)
- Two-thirds of children denied primary education are girls, and 75% of the world's 876 million illiterate adults are women. (*Ask Women*)
- Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, produce half of the world's food, and yet earn only 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property. (*World Development Indicators, 1997, Womankind Worldwide*)

Education is not a silver bullet and several studies suggest that the potential of education to transform can

### Box 1: 53 Member States of the Commonwealth

Antigua/Barbuda	Ca	1981	Mozambique	Af	1995
Australia	Pa	1931	Namibia	Af	1990
Bahamas	Ca	1973	Nauru	Pa	1968
Bangladesh	As	1972	New Zealand	Pa	1931
Barbados	Ca	1966	Nigeria	Af	1960
Belize	Ca	1981	Pakistan	As	1947
Botswana	Af	1966	Papua New Guinea	Pa	1975
Brunei Darussalam	As	1984	St. Kitts Nevis	Ca	1983
Cameroon	Af	1995	St Lucia	Ca	1979
Canada	Ca	1931	St Vincent	Ca	1979
Cyprus	Eu	1961	Samoa	Pa	1970
Dominica	Ca	1978	Seychelles	Af	1976
Fiji	Pa	1970	Sierra Leone	Af	1961
Gambia	Af	1965	Singapore	As	1965
Ghana	Af	1957	Solomon Is	Pa	1978
Grenada	Ca	1974	South Africa	Af	1931
Guyana	Ca	1966	Sri Lanka	As	1948
India	As	1947	Swaziland	Af	1968
Jamaica	Ca	1962	Tanzania	Af	1961
Kenya	Af	1963	Tonga	Pa	1970
Kiribati	Pa	1979	Trinidad/Tobago	Ca	1962
Lesotho	Af	1966	Tuvalu	Pa	1978
Malawi	Af	1964	Uganda	Af	1962
Maldives	As	1982	United Kingdom	Eu	-
Malaysia	As	1957	Vanuatu	Pa	1980
Malta	Eu	1964	Zambia	Af	1964
Mauritius	Af	1968			

Af – Africa (18)      As – Asia (8)      Eu – Europe (3)  
Pa – Pacific (11)      Ca – Canada/Caribbean (13)

be overstated. Women, even those who do get an education, face embedded disadvantage in labour markets, property ownership and sexual and reproductive choices. Bolder action is needed on all of these fronts.

Amidst persistent discrimination, education equips girls and women with a basic confidence in their abilities and rights, an ability to acquire and process information, and increased earning power. Education is one of the key sectors for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. Its effects in improving the conditions of women's lives through enhancing their access to public participation and employment are well documented by the Commonwealth Secretariat (*New Gender Mainstreaming Series on Gender issues 2004*).

### 2. Commonwealth performance against the MDG on gender equality in schools

The Commonwealth Secretariat has contributed in developing a new instrument for measuring performance on gender equality through commissioning the Beyond Access project undertaken by Unterhalter, Challender and Rajagopalan (2005). It should be noted that the complex processes that take place in education, particularly with regard to gender dynamics, are not particularly amenable to analysis through 'simple' measures based on inputs

and outputs to the system. Instead, various measuring instruments have been employed to construct the Gender Equality in Education Index (GEEI) which is a composite of:

- Girls' net attendance rate at primary school
- Girls' survival rate over five years in primary school
- Girls' secondary Net Enrolment Ratio.

These are the main areas of importance with regard to gender equity and girls' education. The table shows the Gender Equality in Education Index (GEEI) for most Commonwealth countries in Africa.

The changes in GEEI for African Commonwealth countries from the early 1990s to 2003 tell a devastating story. Of the top six countries in 1993, only Botswana, South Africa, and Namibia have made gains, relatively modest in many cases and the highest-scoring countries in Africa rank well below countries like Sri Lanka in Asia. South Asian countries especially Pakistan have the lowest GPI. There have been similar large declines in countries lower down the ranking order. Cameroon's GEEI has declined by more than 50 per cent, Nigeria's by 23 per cent, and Kenya's by 28 per cent.

In no other region were there spectacular declines in GEEI like those observed in much of Africa. The combination of debt, decline in social-sector provision, war, and repressive governments has had devastating effects on gender equality in education. Only in Uganda was there huge government and civil-society mobilisation for gender equality in education, but a considerable task still remains for that country.

### 3. The Secretariat's work on Gender and Education

#### Gender-stereotyping in education and getting girls into science education

Identification and sharing of good practices are vital in addressing gender in education. In 2004, the Secretariat organised two regional workshops in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia on the issue of up-scaling promising practices where the sharing of a number of well-researched experiences from the state and non-state sectors took place. While the African Workshop was organised in collaboration with FAWE and attended by twenty four countries (a number of non-Commonwealth countries attended with support of partner organisations), the South Asian one was organised in collaboration with UNICEF and attended by all five South Asian countries.

The task of advocacy on up-scaling of good practices continued in 2005-06. The analytical reports of the two workshops were published and distributed to all partner agencies and participating countries. This was followed by a round table in Pakistan on policy challenges for up-scaling good practices where all five South Asian Commonwealth countries attended. The GEEI report was also published and disseminated to all African and other Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth Secretariat has been instrumental in focusing on contemporary issues even in the past. During

the late 1980s, the Secretariat's work in gender and science, mathematics and technology (SMT) has been complemented through collaboration with the Forum for African Women Educationalists' (FAWE) project on Female Education in Mathematics and Science in Africa (FEMSA). FEMSA has made significant inroads into devising interventions for the problems that keep girls lagging behind boys in science- and mathematics-based subjects by aiming to:

- improve the participation and performance of girls in SMT subjects at both primary and secondary levels; and
- invigorate Ministries of Education and policy-makers to make the necessary adjustments in curriculum, teacher training and examinations, to ensure fuller participation and performance in SMT by both boys and girls.

The Secretariat and its partners have succeeded in placing the issue of women's participation in SMT on the agenda of most countries and agencies in the Commonwealth. Certainly, in recruiting students into all levels of education there is greater awareness of the need to ensure a better representation of girls.

Country	GEEI	Rank	GEEI %	Rank	% change in GEEI
	1993		2003		
Mauritius	89	1	81	1	-9
Botswana	73	2	78	2	7
Swaziland	68	4	60	5	-11
South Africa	64	5	66	4	3
Namibia	62	6	72	3	16
Zambia	42	7	36	11	-14
Lesotho	37	8	42	7	14
Kenya	36	9	26	12	-28
Ghana	34	10	39	9=	15
Tanzania	33	11=	39	9=	18
Cameroon	33	11=	15	16	-55
Nigeria	26	13	20	14=	-23
Uganda	24	14	54	6	125
Mozambique	20	15=	20	14=	0
Malawi	20	15=	26	12	30

Note: Zimbabwe which is no longer a Commonwealth member appeared in the original table at 3<sup>rd</sup> rank in 1993 and 8<sup>th</sup> rank in 2003.

The present focus of the Secretariat's work starting post-Edinburgh Conference (15CCEM) is on enhancing understanding and capacities with regard to gender parity and equality in education. This includes the following:

- Research and publications to bridge information gaps, guide advocacy and build capacities. The focus is on research relating to areas that are critical for the purpose but remain under-researched, such as gender analysis of teacher education and classroom practices; gender analysis of processes in teaching, learning and management in secondary education; development of the GEEI; and boys' underachievement in selected Commonwealth countries.
- Pilot projects and other interventions at the grassroots level for demonstration and capacity building. One major initiative recently started is Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) in Education in Sindh, Pakistan, in collaboration with UNDP. The project includes elements of research, capacity building and integration of changed budgeting and expenditure practices in education to make it more

gender-responsive. Another example is the development of a Social Learning Package for lower secondary grades in India in collaboration with CARE-India. Once ready, this should serve as a resource for teaching gender equality and diversity-related issues in other countries and regions as well.

Integrating the issues of gender in the initiatives meant for universalisation is also being emphasised. For instance, gender was an important aspect of discourse at the regional workshop held in Africa on nomadic education. Similarly, HIV and AIDS are severely affecting girls' education adversely and that is being addressed through various interventions. A workshop on Good Practices in Education and HIV/AIDS in Africa was organised in collaboration with the Human and Social Research Council (HSRC) and ADEA in South Africa.

### **Concerns about male under-performance in some education systems**

The Secretariat is also becoming increasingly aware of the problem of boys' underachievement in some countries. This is focused primarily among the Commonwealth's high- and middle-income countries.

The relative underachievement of boys in most middle- and high-income countries is limited largely to under-performance of boys in language and to under-participation attributable to economic reasons such as early labour-force participation in low-income countries. The trend, though not as sharp as still observed in disparities against girls, is becoming more evident and deserves greater attention and analysis. The Secretariat, in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning, has undertaken a cross-country study on boys' underachievement which is now available in published form.

### **Gender dimension of teacher recruitment and deployment**

Improved teacher education, teacher management and support (TMS) have been identified as important ingredients to improve the quality of education. The Commonwealth's principal thrust focused on improving the quality, delivery and working conditions of teachers in Africa. As a result in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Uganda and Zambia, the Secretariat's former Education Programme worked with ministries of education on issues related to teacher management including teachers' records systems, codes of conduct for teachers, and the place of women in the teaching service.

In the TMS work a gender perspective was adopted because: it is comparative, encompassing the perspectives of both men and women; it helps to identify the disadvantages suffered by all; it recognises humanity's heterogeneous nature; and it involves everyone in finding solutions. Three strategies for mainstreaming gender into the TMS Programme were adopted: problem diagnosis; needs assessment and gender sensitisation.

## **4. Commonwealth of Learning and Gender in Education**

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is committed to removing barriers to women's access to education through the delivery of gender-balanced projects and initiatives that are specifically targeted to benefit women and girls. COL is also committed to participating in the implementation of the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development.

Open and distance education, because of its flexibility and accessibility, has the potential to reach the previously 'unreached' such as the disabled, rural poor and girls and women. Distance education overcomes many of the barriers faced by girls and women trying to access conventional education systems. COL also awarded fellowships, paying special attention to achieve an equitable gender balance. The overall percentage awarded to females was 37.5%.

COL has also enabled the Women's International Network (WIN) to publish a book on how women can use technologies for open and distance learning. COL carried out an environmental scan on the literature and barriers encountered by women in accessing the new information and communications technologies. In addition, COL designed and implemented an electronic database on gender-related training materials available within the UN system and Commonwealth Secretariat.

## **5. The Commonwealth Foundation**

The Commonwealth Foundation focuses on attaining gender equity in access to education; identifies successful strategies and incentives around the Commonwealth and publishes the findings. It also provides small grants to civil society organisations that promote and monitor girls' education; and works to achieve change through ministerial dialogue.

## **6. Gender balance in Commonwealth Scholarships**

The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) was instituted in 1959 following recommendations of the first Commonwealth Education Conference and is the flagship scheme of Commonwealth higher education co-operation. The awards are for 'men and women of high intellectual promise who may be expected to make a significant contribution to life in their own countries on their return from study overseas'.

The 2006 report shows that award-holders want to return home for a variety of reasons. Two thirds of those returning rated family ties as a significant factor in their desire to return home, with over half (52%) citing employer obligations. 60% mentioned the obligation to the sponsoring body as a factor, whilst only 17% noted that a lack of employment opportunity in the UK influenced their decision.

While not practising positive discrimination in selection, the UK Commission does seek to encourage the participation of women and has in recent years increasingly highlighted to nominating agencies the need to ensure a fair gender balance in their selections. In 2005 women made up 40% of those nominated for

awards, and 41% of those were selected by the Commission. Female candidates in the Split-site and Professional Fellowships schemes did particularly well at the UK selection stage.

The need for continuing action on gender, however, is also demonstrated by the figures, particularly from the Academic Staff Scholarships and Academic Fellowships schemes.

### Briefing Notes in this series

1. Commonwealth co-operation in education: a profile
2. Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers
3. The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan
4. Distance education and the Commonwealth of Learning
5. The Commonwealth and Education for All
6. Gender and education: the Commonwealth dimension
7. Commonwealth education co-operation: role of civil society
8. Education about the Commonwealth
9. Science, technology and mathematics education.
10. Commonwealth student mobility: trends and issues
11. Teacher development and mobility in the Commonwealth
12. School and college linking in the Commonwealth

Nominations of women in both categories remain low, reflecting their under-representation in academic life in developing-country universities. Unusually, in 2005-2006 the percentage of selections in the UK for the Academic Staff Scholarships was slightly lower than that of women nominated. As a result, the total number of awards given to women across all schemes remained stable at 41%.

## 7. The ACU programmes for staff development of women academics

The Association for Commonwealth Universities (ACU) began in 1985 to address the problem of enhancing the participation of women in higher education management. It works with many international partners, such as the Commonwealth Secretariat, UNESCO and the International Federation of Women. The ACU and the Commonwealth Secretariat have worked closely in developing the remit of the Women's Programme; and since 1991, have planned, and given financial support to a wide variety of projects. This makes interventions on two fronts: changing the management structures of universities and enhancing the capacity of women in universities to break through 'the glass ceiling' into top management positions. They have also developed training modules with themes in management, leadership, research, and mentoring skills.

Surveys conducted by the former Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service (CHEMS) include: *A Single Sex Profession?* (1998); *Female Staff Numbers in Commonwealth Countries* by the ACU (2002); and *Still a Single-Sex Profession?* The studies confirm that women are still under-represented among full-time staff in both the academic and administrative hierarchies of Commonwealth universities.

The ACU continues supporting women from less developed countries on a one-year Women and Management in Higher Education MA degree course at the University of London. Several women from South

Africa, Sri Lanka, Trinidad, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana and Namibia have completed it and returned home to be promoted to take up new policy-making roles.

The Policy Research Unit, one of the core services of the ACU, conducted a survey on international trends in the recruitment and retention of academic staff in 2005. The report indicates an increase in the number of female academics as a desirable demographic trend. The trend is much more prevalent in economically advantaged countries such as Australia, Canada and USA.

Future activities of the ACU are to move towards: mainstreaming gender concerns throughout higher education; extensive advocacy work with those in a position to effect change; instituting gender sensitisation programmes training for both men and women in higher education; extending the network of senior women managers; and developing more link and exchange programmes between women's study centres.

## 8. Work of Commonwealth Countries League's Education Fund

Since 1925 the Commonwealth Countries League has promoted the development, education and empowerment of women. The challenge of providing free and universal education at secondary level in countries struggling with development, health and economic issues cannot always be met. Even when basic tuition is provided free, families may not be able to afford the associated costs - travel, uniform, books, and examination fees. Girls can be especially vulnerable if they are expected to remain at home to help care for the family or work in the fields or markets. Sadly in some cases education for girls is still viewed as a waste of time.

The CCL Education Fund, a charity formed in the 1960s, sponsors girls of high potential enabling them to complete their secondary school education in cases where, without such help, they would be unable to do so. Over 2,000 girls have benefited from the Education Fund around the Commonwealth.

A major new CCL initiative has been the launch of its Alumnae Association. It is hoped that contact can thereby be maintained with girls previously sponsored by the Education Fund and that they, in turn, will be active in communicating with each other across the Commonwealth and in supporting the education of girls and women especially through secondary school.

### More information

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