Whilst little of this will be new for those who know Sierra Leone, the scale of these issues is shocking, as is their everyday nature – girls struggling, for example, to identify violence where it is simply part of the fabric of their daily lives.

The context for this is a life lived in gendered poverty, with significant social-cultural limitations on (materially) opportunities, assets, resources and (culturally) power, voice, and expectations. A restricted set of dominant narratives cast girls as sources of income, future wives and mothers with few other models available – even if this normative model only rarely shows up in the more complex reality. Society attempts to police this limited scope for girls, which is often internalised by girls themselves, providing further justification for keeping them from assets and opportunities.

In October 2020, Purposeful and partners interviewed 2,239 out-of-school girls, aged between 13–19 years old as part of the Girls’ Circles programme. Their responses affirm what we know – that girls’ lives in Sierra Leone, especially those who are out of school, are characterised by multiple hardships: little to no education; the ubiquity of transactional sex; teen pregnancy; and everyday violence. But also, that to be a girl is to resist, and girls are primed to change their lives for the better when there is a shift in their ability to access and imagine their choices.
It manifests in social control over girls’ lives, leading to, in their lived experience, limited choices they can imagine and actually access. In the midst of all this, there is an insidious ‘choice’ narrative, that denies or neglects the lack of options, and so can often place blame for girls’ situations on their shoulders and as the result of their limited choices.

Whilst it is true that girls are regularly choosing between a palette of dehumanising options for their everyday lives from a position of no or minimal power, it is not the case that everything is done to girls or that we should see girls as victims.

They are already often doing extraordinary things to get by and support themselves, and when given further space or platforms, girls take action – they want more for themselves and are primed to be agents of change over their own lives.

This helps explain the significant impact we have already seen from the Girls’ Circles programming – girls are questioning their situations, refusing early marriage, returning to school, and starting businesses and saving schemes together. This impact has been delivered through the radio show content but also through the safe space format where power relations are more equalised and girls feel more comfortable to speak up, ask questions, and start to live in their full power.

As such, there is a need to subvert current narratives, which often either blame girls for making bad choices – assuming too much choice and power – or see things as being entirely done to girls, with girls in need of protection. The reality is neither of these – yes, girls’ situations are constrained by gendered poverty, but they are primed to change their lives for the better when there is a shift in their ability to access and imagine their choices.

Building on the strong foundations of the Girls’ Circles programme, the Karo Kura Girls’ Circles Collectives will grow to open up opportunities and new visions, enabling girls to take action and change things for themselves. Girls’ Circle Collectives will create self and collective guided opportunities for girls, supported with mentor-led life skills sessions to enable their journey, girls-centred media and storytelling via Karo Kura Konection and Kompin to inspire and inform, and provide the opportunity to apply for micro grants to further advance the goals and ambitions of their Collective.

Read the full report at wearepurposeful.org

Read more about Purposeful Girls’ Circle Collectives in Girls Take Action

Disclaimer: This work has been funded by UK aid from the UK government, however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government’s official policies.