GIRLS TAKE ACTION

Tales of sisterhood: How mentors are collectivising with girls in their communities in Sierra Leone

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2020, under the banner of Kara Kura Girls’ Circles, Purposeful and five local partners embarked on a journey of supporting over 15,000 out-of-school girls across six districts in Sierra Leone. The purpose of Girls’ Circles was to deepen girls’ ability to understand the structural causes of their marginalisation, to see themselves as equals in society, and to value themselves as individuals who have the choice and agency to claim their rights. The Girls’ Circles are a space where girls can form solidarity with other girls by providing access to girl-only spaces and a network of 601 young women mentors. Designed specifically for marginalised girls in Sierra Leone, girl-friendly content is delivered through a girl-centred radio show and drama (Karo Kura Konection and Kompin) and a best-in-class life skills curriculum. Mentors each have access to a smartphone and receive a monthly stipend and data top-up.

In June and July 2021, we spoke with five inspirational mentors about how they are forming collectives with each other and with girls to advance girls’ goals, to resist, to push back and shape their futures.

Here we share their stories of collective action, their advice to other mentors and girls embarking on their collective journey, what they believe girls in their communities need to thrive and how they think organisations, like Purposeful, should support girls in their communities.

HOW DOES BEING A MENTOR IMPACT YOUR LIFE?

“At first, I was not able to do anything for myself, but now I can take care of myself and I can do things because of the monthly stipend that I receive. I now know my rights and I can make decisions for myself. I know that I have the power to change my life.” – MEMUNATA S.

“I was super excited because the stipend provided has helped me to enroll for a diploma course at the university to further my studies on electronic engineering. Being a mentor, I feel proud. I see myself as a role model to both the girls I am working with and to my family.” – ESTHER

“This role has really changed me as a woman, in the way I think about both myself and other girls. I am no longer that girl who boys and men take advantage of, and I stand up for other girls in my community. I support and advise them. I am no longer shy. I am now respected.” – KADIATU

“Being a mentor has shaped and has impacted my life positively, I can earn money and make better decisions as a woman. I was encouraged by my field officer to enroll at a vocational training centre to learn skills, which today helps me to earn money and respect in my community. In turn, I can now support other girls.” – MEMUNATA K.

“Being a mentor has improved my life a lot. I am a respected person in my community, and I now have a voice. I am part of decision-making in my community, and I am now recognised by my community elders. My business has also grown. I now stand up boldly and speak up in public. I can take care and provide for myself, my child and my family.” – AMINATA
GIRLS CLEAN UP WITH A SOAP MAKING BUSINESS

MEMUNATA S, AGE 26, KARENE

I came up with the initiative to ask all the interested girls in my club to each contribute 2,000 Sierra Leonean Leones (SLL – approx. 0.15 GBP) so that we can start a soap making business. 16 girls in my club, aged 17 – 19, are part of the business. We used the money we raised to buy the ingredients – this included palm oil, caustic soda and plastic. By asking them to contribute a small amount of money, it ensures that they are focused on the business because their own money is involved. When we make the soap, we share it among ourselves for everyone to go and sell. We were able to expand the business because of the demand for soap in the community.

We started with 80,000 SLL (approx. £6 GBP) when we first started saving to make the soap, and now we have close to 540,000 SLL (approx. £38 GBP). The reason we chose soap making is because it involves only little capital to start up. We didn’t have enough money to start another business even though there are other business options available.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU AND THE GIRLS IN YOUR CLUB TO DO THIS?

I decided to approach the older girls in my club with the soap making business to help ourselves and our families. – It means that if a girl is stranded, she will be able to take care of herself, she will not need to do something bad to have money. There is a girl in my club whose child was seriously sick, and she had no way of raising money to take care of her child. She reached out to me, and I supported her with the little that I have.

WHAT CHANGE IS THIS HAVING ON THE LIVES OF GIRLS IN YOUR CLUB?

This has created significant change for the girls in my club. For example, there was a girl who was abandoned by her family when she became pregnant. A few months later when she was asked to live with the man who impregnated her, he ran away and left her stranded. The soap making business was her only source of income to feed herself and take care of the pregnancy. She has now given birth – things are not all rosy, but at least she can eat and take care of her child with no support from any family member.

WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS FOR THIS WORK?

If I had the capital, I’d like to establish other businesses – like groundnut farming and giving micro-credit to girls to sell what they want and save the profits, which can then be shared later.

AS A MENTOR, HOW DOES THIS COLLECTIVE WORK MAKE YOU FEEL?

I feel blessed and so good that I can help others. I can see the change this soap business is making for us all.
I realised that there were so many girls and women in our vocational centre who are opting to learn catering and home economics, because it is considered to be a woman’s work. I was the only girl in my class who changed from home economics to electrical work.

I encouraged the girls in my club to learn from the basic skills I have acquired through my studies. I spend time with them at the Girls’ Circle after the radio drama, to teach them basic things like how to fix sockets and about light bulbs. I have 10 girls in my club who are part of the team.

We developed a charging centre where people pay to charge their phones and gadgets. This was in response to the electricity crisis in Makeni, our capital town. The money collected from the charging centre is used to buy more materials and also saved so if any of us have problems, we can then borrow the money to support ourselves.

**WHAT INSPIRED YOU AND THE GIRLS IN YOUR CLUB TO DO THIS?**

This work was considered man’s work, and we are all inspired by the Karo Kura Koneksi radio drama which told us that we can be anything we choose to be, as long as we are willing to learn and commit ourselves to it.

**WHAT CHANGE IS THIS HAVING ON THE LIVES OF GIRLS IN YOUR CLUB?**

It has increased our confidence level and our respect in our homes and community. We are able to provide for our basic needs, like buying food for our children, from the money we make from the charging centre. At first, the community was not encouraging us, and my uncle said that I should enroll to get a teacher’s certificate. But when we succeeded with it all and people could charge their phones and gadgets during the electricity crisis, everyone became very appreciative of us.

**WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS FOR THIS WORK?**

I want to acquire the Higher National Diploma, which will enable me to work in any institution. I want the girls in my club to enroll in the vocational institute so we can train other girls in our community who have also dropped out of school.

**AS A MENTOR HOW DOES THIS COLLECTIVE WORK MAKE YOU FEEL?**

I feel very proud and happy. Teaching other girls and using myself as an example to inspire girls is like blessing in disguise. I have attained a lot of respect in my community.
Before Girls’ Circles started, me and my mentees had nothing productive to do. We were just idling around, depending on male relatives and our parents. When the Girls’ Circles started, Purposeful taught us a lot of things and ideas. When I started receiving my stipend, I decided to use the money on something beneficial to both me and the girls.

I decided to discuss ideas and brought together ten girls who have smart ideas about starting a business venture. We decided on the idea of selling fish in our communities. We went to the river and nearby fishing villages to buy fish to sell. We made contacts with boat owners and now we buy the fish from them, then we sell the fish to people in our community. Sometimes, we dry it and at other times, we sell it fresh. If we buy around Le500,000 (approx. £35 GBP) worth of fish, we can make a profit of about Le300,000 to 400,000 (approx. £21 GBP to £28 GBP).

**WHAT INSPIRED YOU AND THE GIRLS IN YOUR CLUB TO DO THIS?**

What really inspired us is the radio drama that we listen to. We were so touched by the girls, doing business to help themselves and other girls in their community. We saw that the business they are doing is saving them from the bad guys in their community and they are able to help their families and children.

**WHAT CHANGE IS THIS HAVING ON THE LIVES OF GIRLS IN YOUR CLUB?**

Now I am making my own money. I am in control and feel so respected because I can now earn a living. There is unity amongst us. We now have the power! The community is so happy and admires what we are doing.

Before we started this business we pass around town with boys and at night, men call us in the corners to have sex with them for money.

“We no longer stand in the dark to wait for men to give us money…”

Now that we have started our small business no man will dare try us. We can now be responsible for our children and our homes, even our parents. We buy clothes for them and food. We are so happy together. I am so bold now and free to talk in public, I am no longer shy.

**WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS FOR THIS WORK?**

When we get enough money, I will sit my West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Some girls want to go back to school and others want to support their kids’ education and continue doing business and Osusu (savings). We don’t want to rely on men to do this for us.
CATERING FOR OUR FUTURES

MEMUNATA, AGE 24, BOMBALI

We started when we were just listening to the radio and we had nothing to do, but because I am enrolled at the vocational centre, I encouraged girls, who were willing to come together, to learn some of the skills I have learned. With a loan of Le 200,000 (£14 GBP) from our Field Officer and the materials that I gathered from the practical sessions at the vocational centre, we started making cakes and selling them. The story of Lucy and her girls doing business in the radio drama motivated me to encourage girls in my club to learn skills and start our own catering business. We started by making banana bread, then cassava and sauces. Out of the 24 girls in my club, 18 girls are part of the collective.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU AND THE GIRLS IN YOUR CLUB TO DO THIS?

Listening to Karo Kura radio drama – it tells us that a woman can make it in life without a man. Most of the girls in my club have children and have no one to help them with their children. When I had the idea, I approached my Field Officer and she was so happy and encouraged us, and even loaned us money to buy a few items I didn’t have.

WHAT CHANGE IS THIS HAVING ON THE LIVES OF GIRLS IN YOUR CLUB?

So many things have changed in my life and in the lives of girls in the club. I used to be idle after taking my senior secondary school exams, I didn’t have the requirements for university. Some of the girls did commercial sex work at night just to survive and Girls’ Circles helped shape our life positively. Four girls, in our collective, have enrolled in a vocational institute. The chief has said he is happy with the way girls are holding themselves now. If we have any challenges in the community, we can go to him for help.

WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS FOR THIS WORK?

A community member has offered a lease on this place to construct a restaurant because there are no decent places that sell food in the community. I want to open a training centre and employ other people with different skills, where the girls in my community, who have dropped out of school, will be trained and learn new skills.

AS A MENTOR HOW DOES THIS COLLECTIVE WORK MAKE YOU FEEL?

I feel good and proud that I am able to influence girls to join me to learn skills and also work together. Girls’ Circles has brought me so much joy, respect, and recognition.
SAVING TOGETHER FOR A BETTER FUTURE

AMINATA, AGE 21, MOYAMBA

We are six mentors who came up with the idea to start having Osusu (savings) amongst ourselves, have access to more money and invest it in our businesses. The moment our stipends are paid to us, we pay the majority of it to our Osusu and then handover the collective sum to the person who should receive it for the month. When it was my turn to receive the money, I bought five gallons of oil, rice, sugar, gari, and bags of onions. My business has improved, and I am grateful. This keeps me going and I now almost always have money with me.

We decided to do the Osusu because if we have a huge amount of money at one time, we can invest it in our petty trading business. It provides a big boost for us and brings us more money. This will help us to become independent and we will not rely on people for help again as we did before.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU ALL TO DO THIS?

If we were to save individually, it would take a very long time to be able to raise such amounts. You may have problems in using the money or spending it on unnecessary things, but when you receive money in bulk, you don’t want to waste it.

WHAT CHANGE IS THIS HAVING ON YOUR LIVES?

Before I became a mentor, I had no money to support my parents and family members but now I am the one taking care of them. At one point, my father was sick and was admitted to hospital and it was my own turn to collect the Osusu. With this, I was able to pay his hospital bill and that was a very proud moment for me.

We are united as mentors and even some of our mentees are wishing to become like us. They want to be doing the kind of business we are doing and because of the growth and change they have seen.

WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS FOR THIS WORK?

From the businesses we are doing, we want to save money from them for us to further our education at a higher level. We have all taken the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) exams, and some of us have paid college fees from the Osusu. We also want to be independent financially and to continue to be bold and heard in the future.

AS A MENTOR HOW DOES THIS COLLECTIVE WORK MAKE YOU FEEL?

It makes us feel good as young women because the money helps us to do things independently. The money will help us to properly plan our life for the future.
What advice would you give to other mentors and girls thinking about working in a Collective?

“I would advise mentors to focus on this work. This role has improved our lives so much – even just by listening to the radio drama we get advice on how we should live our lives as girls. For mentors who have skills, they should teach their mentees so that they can also learn skills that they can use to make money to take care of themselves.” – MEMUNATA S.

“I want girls to believe that they can do anything if they put their minds to it. I decided to learn this trade because people think I cannot do it and now, it has earned me so much respect.” – ESTHER

“I am sending this message to all my sisters in the world – let’s find ways to invest in business, because if we do this, we will be able to control and care for our lives, do something good for our children and we will no longer depend on men.” – KADIATU

“The advice that I give to other mentors is that if you have any skills, share them with your mentees so they can also learn from you – don’t keep it to yourself. We are able to change the lives of girls – we are like mothers or teachers. Even if you are a mentor who has no skills yet, you should push yourself to learn something so that you can help yourself and girls in your community to be self-reliant.” – MEMUNATA K.

“My advice is for other mentors to start doing Osusu (savings) as this will help them to be independent because they will be able to provide for themselves.” – AMINATA
WHAT DO YOU THINK GIRLS IN YOUR COMMUNITY NEED TO THRIVE?

“Girls need microcredit to do business so that they can be self-reliant, because, right now, people laugh at them in the community.” – MEMUNATA S.

“I think girls in my community need skills training to help them learn things which will have a long-term benefit in their lives. I believe girls need skills to help themselves even if they do not have formal schooling.” – ESTHER

“Many girls in my community want support to go to school and others want to do business and others need to learn skills.” – KADIATU

“Girls in my community who have dropped out of school need skills training. It’s not only formal education that helps people. If girls learn skills, it will help them to earn money to take care of their basic needs, without asking anyone or doing anything to get money in a bad way.” – MEMUNATA K.

“Girls need education, especially the younger girls as most of them want to return to school. Our community is a business community, so if girls are also involved in business, it will help them to achieve their goals.” – AMINATA

HOW CAN ORGANISATIONS, LIKE PURPOSEFUL, SUPPORT GIRLS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

“Help us with micro-finance money for us to loan to do our business.” – MEMUNATA S.

“Support girls to learn different skills, that will help them beyond just holding meetings in safe spaces.” – ESTHER

“Support us in doing business and some of our girls and children want to go to school, so we want schools built in our community and support girls to do business and learn skills.” – KADIATU

“I would like Purposeful to continue supporting our work financially.” – MEMUNATA K.

“Purposeful should help to provide businesses for girls or financial support for them to do their own business. This will reduce the bad treatment girls are receiving from their husbands and they will be able to take care of themselves.” – AMINATA
WHAT NEXT?

These stories validate what we acutely know and feel – that when you put assets in the hands of girls, you resource their resistance. Purposeful is deeply committed to centering girls and young women in our work. As a part of that commitment, we listen to girls and mentors throughout every aspect of our programming and grantmaking. These stories echo the voices of the girls, mentors, communities and partners – out-of-school girls need access to financial assets, so they can support their children, return to education, learn skills and start or scale up businesses.

This has led us to reflect, rethink and redesign the Girls’ Circles model to become Girls’ Circles Collectives – an initiative that creates self and collective guided opportunities for girls, supported with mentor-led life skills sessions to enable their journey. This is accompanied by girl-centred media and storytelling via Karo Kura Koneksi and Kompin to inspire and inform, and, critically, the opportunity to apply for micro grants to further advance the goals and ambitions of their Collective.

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