

# Integrating Disability Justice into Girl-Centred Programming

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## **Narratives Matter - Narratives Shape Our World**

As an organisation, we understand the impact that language has in shaping narratives and our understanding of ourselves, each other, and the world. We begin this publication by recognising that when talking about disabilities, there is a rich and wide diversity mirroring the diversity in disabilities themselves. We do not believe in a one size-fits-all approach, but rather commit to being in conversation to continuously understand how we can co-create narratives that honour and respect individual and collective experience, and through this process of co-creation, re-shape our understanding of our world.

We invite you to read *Resourcing Disability Justice: Our Feminist Journey Toward Centring Disability Justice* at [this page](#) to dive deeper into the set of guiding principles that we have created, in conversation with Disability Rights activists, artists, organisations, and funders, to guide our efforts to honour the stories, experiences, and intersecting identities of people with disabilities. We are in a continuous process of learning and unlearning and are deeply grateful to the Disability Rights movements and individuals powering this, and all those who have led the way throughout history to break the bounds of what has been drawn as permissible by an oppressive system to create a world that is not only more accessible, but where we all belong.

### **Summary**

With the legacy of colonialism and its connection to ableism, the pervasiveness and nuances of the discrimination and marginalisation faced by people with disabilities in Sierra Leone is set against the complexities of a decade long civil war, an Ebola

epidemic and natural and man-made disasters. We know that humanitarian crises of these natures exacerbate the systems and narratives of inequality that already exist. We also know that they themselves give rise to many disabilities - from acts of extreme violence during the civil war and displacement, to what it means to survive Ebola. These injustices, inequities, and stigma worsen when intersected with other marginalised identities, such as, being an adolescent girl. With entrenched negative attitudes towards out-of-school girls, those with disabilities experience an increased risk of violence and abuse, limited socio-economic opportunities, including access to health, education, and social isolation.

Purposeful and partners are on a disability accessibility and inclusion journey to intentionally work with and for girls with disabilities and how we integrate a Disability Justice framework, specifically within our flagship Girls' Circle Collectives programme in Sierra Leone with 15,000 out-of-school adolescent girls. Highlighted is the very real transformation that takes place when this approach is combined with advocacy efforts that change systems.

*"We learn that, even if you are disable you are able to do what other girls can do to be stronger and not neglected in the communities and the society as a whole."*

*- Mentor, 19 years old, Bombali*

On this journey of learning and practical implementation, we offer up considerations for what we would do differently in the future and how we're adapting our approaches. These may not be new, but by naming them, we not only hold ourselves accountable to do better but may also help others to reflect on their own practices.

- ***Listen to girls with disabilities as the experts of their lived experience*** – a mantra across our work that we’re trying to be more intentional about, including ensuring that their wisdom is part of our learning work.
- ***Give girls with disabilities the platform to share their own stories.*** The protectionist approach to programming is often more extreme when looking at the intersectionality of disability and gender but we must resist this - we know that girls and young women with disabilities are powerful storytellers and advocates, given the space and opportunity.
- ***Invest time and resources to find girls with disabilities.*** For communities, like the rural ones we work in in Sierra Leone, we cannot assume that girls with disabilities will be able to access interventions and programmes designed for them. Including the *Washington Group Short Set* is essential for accurate data - 6% of the 15,000 out-of-school adolescent girls in Girls’ Circle Collectives have some type of disability. Had we simply included a direct question on disability, due to a combination of stigma and limited access to health services, we would not have identified so many girls.
- ***Consider how girls with disabilities can be more than programme participants.*** Mentors with disabilities are important role models in their communities, reinforcing the messages delivered via the radio drama and talkshow, and challenging negative narratives. We know that disabilities are diverse and intersect with multiple identities and we are actively looking to represent girls and young feminists with different disabilities in our radio broadcasts

- ***Meeting the need for assistive devices:*** From wheelchairs and crutches, to glasses and hearing aids, this populations' need for basic assistive devices is massively underserved. We are looking at how we can leverage flexible resources to meet some of these needs and/or make linkages to other organisations.
- ***Tailor training to be inclusive of people with disabilities,*** especially safeguarding training, to enable our teams, partners, and mentors to think about how they are being inclusive of people with disabilities in their work. Rather than standalone, incorporating additional information or sections into existing training makes it more integrated.
- ***Programming must go hand in hand with advocacy.*** If we don't invest in advocacy and coalition building, we will never dismantle the power structures that continue to oppress and exclude.

We are evolving how we work and who we are to be stronger allies to girls, young feminists and activists with disabilities, and with a commitment to continuing to find structural ways to deepen inclusion across our work. For us, this means centring the voices and expertise of the girls, mentors and young activists with disabilities who are working every day to build a world that is more inclusive and accessible, safe and free and full of all of the boundless possibilities they deserve.

In working towards Disability Justice, we know that the principle of intersectionality is essential to this work and that working to dismantle ableism as individuals and as an organisation, is central to our collective liberation.

## **We are Purposeful**

Purposeful is a feminist movement building hub for girls, young feminists and their allies, rooted in Africa and working around the world. Centring the political power of girls and young feminists, we support their organising at the intersections of multiple movements for justice, through a range of collaborative funds, advocacy, coalition-building and programmatic work on the African Continent and beyond. This work is organised across four mutually reinforcing power-building strategies:

### **Redistributing Power Assets: Funding girls' resistance**

Grounded in feminist principles of solidarity and reciprocity, we are reimagining what it means to hold movement resources in deep relationship and with deep accountability to girls. Working across multiple levels - through global funding windows to deeply rooted community re-granting mechanisms - we re-frame grant-making practice so that girls and young feminists can define and determine resource distribution in the service of their own visions, goals and dreams of freedom.

### **Building Collective Power: Building a base, raising consciousness and nurturing solidarity**

Grounded in movement theory - and deeply inspired by Black liberation and anti-imperialist movements on the continent and beyond - we hold space for girls to come together, learn together, to ask why, to push back and to transcend. We mobilise

girls, young feminists and their allies at scale, modelling new beliefs and shifting cultural conversations in community at large.

### **Organising Power Holders: Influencing and coalition building**

We advocate for more and better resources, policies and programmatic practices with and for girls across local, national and global decision-making spaces. We leverage learnings from our own practice to support others to move from protectionist to power building approaches to supporting girls. Working in partnership with civil society, development and philanthropic communities, we hold learning spaces, convene practitioners, build national coalitions and co-create a collective advocacy voice.

### **Transforming Power Structures: Political advocacy and agenda setting**

We work in deep partnership with girls, young feminists and their older feminist allies to hold power-keepers to account. Our advocacy takes different forms in different places, for example working with girls to lobby for change in their communities, co-creating new policy provisions with local authorities in West Africa, or holding governments to account through formal legal systems.

Read more on these Purposeful website pages:

[Theory of Change](#)

[Strategy](#)

***As we celebrate our fifth birthday, this report offers insight into how we're bringing a Disability Justice framework into our work to build collective power in Sierra Leone.*** We also offer some reflections and practical considerations from this work over the last five years, as we continue on our journey of learning and unlearning with the Disability Rights movements and the communities powering it; girls, young women mentors, young feminists, partners and the allies we work with.

### **Why Disability Justice?**

Disability Justice is a framework that is part of the second wave of the Disability Rights movement and co-created by *“disabled activists of color, originally queer women of color in progressive and radical movements that did not systematically address ableism.”* It's often used in tandem or interchangeably with Disability Rights, and at times, conflated with inclusion and accessibility. Read more from *Disability Justice – a working draft* by Patty Berne on [this Sins Invalid page](#).

*“Disability inclusion is a broad term to describe approaches to advance access and inclusion for disabled people. A disability justice approach centers the priorities and approaches of those most historically excluded groups, such as women, people of color, immigrants, and people who identify as LGBTQ+.”*

- *Disability & Philanthropy Forum*. Learn more on [this page from their website](#).

Recognising with humility that this is the beginning of our learning journey, we seek to work intentionally with a Disability Justice framing precisely because it moves beyond a rights-based approach and is intentionally political and intersectional.

*“Disability justice recognizes the intersecting legacies of white supremacy, colonial capitalism, gendered oppression and ableism in understanding how people's bodies and minds are labelled ‘deviant’, ‘unproductive’, ‘disposable’ and/or ‘invalid’.”*

- Conspire for Change. Learn more on [this page from their website](#).

We know that girls and young feminists who sit at the cross-roads of intersections are already resisting, and we believe that by being their allies and supporting them with through strategies, be it resourcing or building collective power, they can, and will, deepen their individual and collective resistance - creating a world where all girls and young feminists are living in safety and freedom.

For more resources, tools and practices around Disability Justice, we invite you to visit the [Disability Justice resource directory](#), [the Disability News Library](#), as well as the resources listed at the end of this publication - [Resourcing Disability Justice: Our Feminist Journey Toward Centring Disability Justice](#).

## **Grounding In Sierra Leone**

Purposeful is founded and headquartered in Sierra Leone and as such, this context often informs our thinking.

*“In Sierra Leone, we are all too familiar with the realities which girls with disabilities face in their communities. As they become adolescents and young women, the harsh reality expands to include the real risk of sexual violence, abuse and harassment. As an organisation, we know that we need to be intentional about reaching this group of girls, and over the last five years, we've been learning, reflecting and adapting - from*

*supporting girls and young women with disabilities to strategise and resist, challenging the wider negative narratives that exist about all people with disabilities, fighting for radical inclusion in education policy, and seeking to make the spaces we create accessible and inclusive, in Sierra Leone and beyond.”*

*Chernor Bah, Co-Founder and Co-CEO, Purposeful*

With the legacy of colonialism and its connection to ableism, the pervasiveness and nuances of the discrimination and marginalisation faced by people with disabilities in Sierra Leone is set against the complexities of a decade long civil war, an Ebola epidemic and natural and man-made disasters. We know that humanitarian crises of these natures exacerbate the systems and narratives of inequality that already exist. We also know that they themselves give rise to many disabilities - from experiencing extreme violence during the civil war and displacement, to what it means to survive Ebola.

*“.. one year following acute disease, survivors of the recent EVD outbreak have higher odds of persisting disability in mobility, vision, and cognition. Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression persist in EVD survivors.”*

*- From Disability Among Ebola Survivors and Their Close Contacts in Sierra Leone: A Retrospective Case-Controlled Cohort Study. More information in the upcoming further reading section.*

The Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Census data finds that 1.3% of the population has a disability, in sharp contrast to perceptions locally and to global estimates. The methodology used to collect data on disability in this survey has been

criticised and an alternative survey in 2018, indicates that 4.3% of the population has a disability.

While the data may not provide a clear picture, as it so rarely does alone, what is not debatable is the profound inequities and stigma that persons with disabilities face in Sierra Leone. With limited access to education, health care, and employment, people with disabilities are pushed to the margins of their communities. These injustices, inequities, and stigma are exacerbated when intersected with other marginalised identities - such as, being an adolescent girl.

*“When I attended school, my schoolmates provoked me and laughed at me a lot. They said that I was not fit to be among them because I am disabled. They would say that I can’t do the things that they can. I found it difficult to cope and had no friends... I dropped out of school in JSS3 and I went into street begging. There were many challenges out there in the streets as well. Men take advantage of girls with disabilities and take us as night wives. In our communities we are totally ignored when it comes to taking decisions due to our disabilities. I thought that I was not a worthy human being in the community.”*

*Aminata, 19 years old, Sierra Leone*

While underfunded systems and poverty contribute, traditional beliefs also play a role in the discrimination persons with disabilities face in Sierra Leone. Some people believe that people with disabilities are a manifestation of the devil or the subject of witchcraft.

On paper there are signs of progress and there is also a growing disability movement, albeit fragmented, nationally. In 2010, Sierra Leone ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the following year, the Persons with Disability Act 2011 was enacted. Following advocacy and lobbying efforts, the Free Health Care Initiative was expanded to include people with disabilities. In March 2021, the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools was launched, targeting four groups, including children with disabilities, “enabling those from marginalised and excluded groups to enter and remain in school until completion”.

In reality, there is still a significant way to go to dismantle the barriers to basic rights and services, and the negative narratives people with disabilities face in Sierra Leone.

### **Further reading:**

Read more about colonialism and its connection to ableism in the following two articles:

- *Ned, Lieketseng. (2022). African Renaissance as a Premise for Reimagined Disability Studies in Africa. Journal of Black Studies. 53. 10.1177/00219347221074391*
- *Hutcheon, Emily & Lashewicz, Bonnie. (2019). Tracing and troubling continuities between ableism and colonialism in Canada. Disability & Society. 35. 1-20. 10.1080/09687599.2019.1647145*

Read more about disability in Sierra Leone in:

- *Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census Thematic Report on Disability, October 2017.*

Criticism of the methodology used in the 2015 Population and Census can be found in:

- *Ossul-Vermehren, I., Carew, M.T. and Walker, J. (2022). Assistive Technology in urban low-income communities in Sierra Leone and Indonesia: Rapid Assistive Technology Assessment (rATA) survey results. Bartlett Development Planning Unit - Global Disability Innovation Hub, London.*

The alternative survey to the criticised census that indicated a higher proportion of the population with a disability:

- *Statistics Sierra Leone, World Bank, Government of Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) report 2018. Freetown; 2019.*

More about the belief held by some that people with disabilities are the subject of witchcraft:

- *Emmelie Andregård & Lina Magnusson (2017) Experiences of attitudes in Sierra Leone from the perspective of people with poliomyelitis and amputations using orthotics and prosthetics, Disability and Rehabilitation, 39:26, 2619-2625, DOI: 10.1080/09638288.2016.1236409*

More information about the growing disability movement in Sierra Leone:

- *Amélie van den Brink, Willem Elbers & Aisha Fofana Ibrahim (2021)*  
*Fragmented yet together: the disability movement in Sierra Leone, Disability & Society, 36:7, 1035-1052, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2020.1782174*

## **Programming for Adolescent Girls with Disabilities through Mentorship, Girl-centred Media and Girl-only Spaces**

When disability in Sierra Leone intersects with entrenched negative attitudes towards out-of-school girls, it puts those with disabilities at increased risk of violence and abuse, limited socio-economic opportunities, including access to health, education, and social isolation. We see and feel this in the communities we work in. Read more in our [State of Out-of-School Girls Report \(October 2021\)](#).

Against this backdrop, Purposeful and partners have been on a disability inclusion and accessibility journey to intentionally work with and for girls with disabilities across the efforts we do together. This section outlines what this means within Girls' Circle Collectives, our flagship base building work with 15,000 girls - from data collection to mass media - and shares an insight into the very real transformation that can take place when we integrate a Disability Justice framework in our programming.

## **About Girls' Circle Collectives**

Girls' Circle Collectives are autonomous spaces that bring together girls in ways that enable them to analyse the roots of their oppression, strategise for individual and social change, and access resources and assets to bring their strategies to life.

Reaching over 15,000 out-of-school adolescent girls across six districts of Sierra Leone, it is made up of a set of interrelated and reinforcing components:

1. Girl-only spaces underpinned by a feminist life-skills curriculum
2. A network of over 600 young women mentors
3. Girl-centred media, which includes a radio drama and talkshow called Karo Kura Konection and Kompin
4. Unrestricted resources for girls' organising

Each component of this work is intentional and complementary. While they have some potential in isolation, we believe that together, they are creating a compound effect that works from the inside out and the outside in to affect change across multiple levels.

Read more about this work on [this page of the Purposeful website](#).

### **A focus on girl-centred media**

The Karo Kura Konection and Kompin brand, in many ways, is the embodiment of Purposeful. It is deeply political, feminist, and unapologetically girl-centred. It is born out of crisis and delivered collectively, with joy and creativity.

Karo Kura means New Moon. Tapping into the rich Sierra Leonean culture and tradition, including proverbs, objects (plants, icons, places), spirits, gods or ancestors responsible for rebirth, the name was created with girls, community members, folklore experts, historians and writers across Sierra Leone.

*“The new moon brightens the night, and lets us see things we don’t normally see”*

*- Girl, 15–18 years old, Moyamba, 2016*

Initially developed during the Ebola crisis in 2015, Karo Kura was re-born as the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in 2020. Acutely aware of the very precise ways in which girls are impacted by lockdown and isolation, we knew we needed to mobilise quickly to ensure we could continue to reach the 15,000 girls in the Girls’ Circle Collectives programme, even as the country was shutting down.

Today, Karo Kura Konection and Kompin, a radio drama and talkshow, is broadcast over 70 times a week on stations nationwide, and sent directly to our network of over 600 mentors across Sierra Leone. Since May 2020, there have been three series and a total of 47 episodes. From October 2022, a further 20 episodes will air through Series Four.

The radio drama and talkshow aspects of Karo Kura are grounded in local research and draw on the MARCH (Modelling and Reinforcement to Combat HIV) behavioural change approach. Designed to have mass appeal, a cast of characters model new behaviours, challenging social norms and raising the listeners’ consciousness to the

situation of girls, all the while offering up an alternative – a new narrative about girls. Situated within our Girls' Circle Collective programming, we aspire to represent every girl we reach through these characters and storylines. As it evolves, it is continuously informed by our work with girls, communities, local activists and grassroots organisations.

### **Where we started: Finding the out-of-school girls with disabilities**

We know from experience that if we do not intentionally try to reach out-of-school girls with disabilities, they will remain at home. Indeed, when we first spoke with partners and community leaders about how the programme was for out-of-school adolescent girls, including girls with disabilities, they struggled to see why and how we would include girls with different types of disabilities - how these two groups might come together. This was not their experience of adolescent girls' programming.

We worked with partners and young women mentors on a house-to-house recruitment model - using a survey tool that incorporated the Washington Group Short Set (found [here](#)) and other questions to identify other vulnerabilities. Through this effort - 6% (around 900) of the girls enrolled into Girls' Circles Collectives have a disability.

## **Contextualising the Washington Group (WG) Short Set**

*The WG Short Set of six questions on functioning for use on national censuses and surveys was developed, tested and adopted by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics (WG)... Rather than a dichotomous (Yes/No) static state, disability is a dynamic, complex process that must be understood and 'unraveled' in order to create a measurement tool that would have international relevance and could produce cross-nationally comparable data.*

Read More on [this Washington Group on Disability Statistics page](#).

Including the WG Short Set in our house-to-house recruitment model undoubtedly increased the number of girls with disabilities, however, when we reviewed the questions as a team, there were a few concerns related to the availability and knowledge of assistive devices. The two questions were:

- [Do/Does] [you/he/she] have difficulty seeing, even if wearing glasses?
- [Do/Does] [you/he/she] have difficulty hearing, even if using a hearing aid(s)?

After discussion and some testing, we agreed to leave the question as it pertained to glasses but left out the reference to hearing aids. In the communities we work in, hearing aids are not known. We felt it was important that the questions were reflective of the reality in which girls live.

## **What Came Next: Representing girls with disabilities through girl-centred media**

Of course, it was critical to enrol out-of-schools girls with disabilities to be part of the programme but we also knew that once they showed up to safe spaces, we needed to navigate the stigma and discrimination they may face from other girls, and even mentors in those spaces. With Covid-19 spreading across the globe, our ability to roll out traditional training to mentors and partners on inclusion was limited. However, as you've read, the radio drama and talkshow, offered a unique platform to start conversations and shift narratives, both for the girls themselves and everyone around them.

And so, Sia was imagined into life.

*“Sia is an adolescent girl who is physically challenged, her accessibility depends on a wheelchair but doesn't let that stop her.*

*Sia is bold and courageous as she stands up for herself and her friends. She is also a talented singer and is known for sparking the right business ideas that not only helps them to make money, but also solve community problems like when she initiated the cloth masks business to help the community stay safe during the pandemic and help her and her friends to make money to support themselves, or when she came up with a reusable pad solution to help girls manage their period, and her save money for rent. Sia does not allow herself to be limited by her situation - many girls learn from her courage.*

*This character is able to bring to life the struggles of girls living with disabilities, break the silence and stigma around disability issues and help communities imagine all the endless possibilities of people living with disabilities. Sia reminds me of myself - a very shy teenage girl finding her voice. At some point growing up, we have all been in Sia's position, challenged but doesn't let the pressures of society stop her."*

*- Nyangah Rogers-Wright, Purposeful Staff and Co-Host of Karo Kura Konection and Kompin*

### **A note on safeguarding**

Safeguarding is always a priority across all our work but especially when we and our partners are working directly with girls. As Girls' Circles Collectives was being set up, we rolled out remote safeguarding training to our partners and mentors. This included dedicated information on girls with disabilities - outlining why they may be more at risk and how to speak to and support them in respectful and dignified ways. These messages are reiterated and refreshed at in-person convenings and sessions.

### **Going Even Deeper: Making mentorship inclusive**

In some cases, we were able to take representation further, identifying some young women with disabilities to be mentors in this programme. Purposeful's Programme Manager, Umu Jalloh, shares how she has seen first-hand the impact this has on their lives and their positions in their communities:

*"Working with girls with disabilities affirms the reality that people with disabilities are usually not included in any programmes. Girls' Circle Collectives created a space for them to feel like they belong and can contribute to community development. One of*

*the mentors in Falaba re-enrolled in school and got her university requirement, even though she is challenged with mobility she is determined not to let her situation define her - I feel inspired by her. There is also a mentor with a disability in Moyamba who is now a community teacher. When we started this work they were never considered or respected in their communities.”*

Mentors remind us that a key part of this is access to material resources - in this case, in the form of a monthly stipend, paid to them for the work they do to support and bring girls together.

*“I was not able to have any money due to my disability because I cannot go the wharf to do any business, the stipend I received has help me greatly and now I even volunteer to teach in school.”*

*- Mentor, 22 years old, Moyamba*

*“My life has improve through access to finance - it has helped me to realise my power as a disabled girl, I now earn money for myself, speak in public and give advice to others.”*

*- Mentor, 21 years old, Moyamba*

### **What that’s meant: Transforming perceptions about people with disabilities**

For girls and mentors with disabilities who are listening in Sierra Leone, they are questioning their own internal narratives and how they’ve been socialised to see their own disabilities. ***Sia is helping them to imagine and create new futures and realities for themselves.***

*“Sia makes us aware that even though we are disabled it doesn't mean we have nothing to offer or we can't make it. We should be determined. I feel really happy about Sia in the drama. Before, when everybody went to the farm in the morning I was left alone. But now I know my rights and what to do and what not to do. Before when I was left alone on the veranda, some men would come and take advantage of me. But now they see that I work and I know my rights and know what actions to take if anyone takes advantage of me. It surprises them because they did not expect that of people with disabilities.”*

*- Mentor 21 years old, Falaba*

We feel the narrative also shifting among other girls and young women mentors in the Girls' Circle Collectives and believe that the using drama and stories to role model alternative views and realities about people with disabilities is catalysing this change. When this is coupled with witnessing girls with disabilities in their own circles taking action and driving social change for themselves, the potential is limitless.

A survey with 100 Girls' Circles Collectives girls in October 2021 shows significant shifts in how they view girls with disabilities:

- Almost all girls (93%) believe that that girls with disabilities should be included in Girls' Circles Collectives
- One in two (50%) of girls say their views on girls with disabilities have changed since joining Girls' Circles Collectives

*“I used to laugh and mock disabled people... We would say that he is a witch and that’s why he is disabled, but now through listening to Karo Kura, we have learnt to have mercy on disabled people and treat them well.”*

*Girl, 17 years old, Moyamba*

*“Look at Sia, her friends encourage her to feel good about herself. But before this time, we used to laugh and disturb people with disabilities.”*

*Girl, 18 years old, Moyamba*

*“We learn that, even if you are disable you are able to do what other girls can do to be stronger and not neglected in the communities and the society as a whole.”*

*Mentor, 19 years old, Bombali*

*“Girls love the character because Sia knows how to talk to other people in the drama Kompin and also she knows how to sing the nice song. Sia is very much bold, she can talk anywhere she go and she can not be ashamed of herself. Girls like Sia so much in my girls circle, me also as the mentor I like Sia for her behaving that she do anyway although she is not walking but is better than others, like at singing the chance song. Bravo to Sia.”*

*Mentor, 19 years old, Bonthe*

*“I like Sia because she is proud of her disability. She is always giving a bright example to the people that have disabilities in the community.”*

*Mentor, 25 years old, Bombali*

## **From programme to policy: towards the radical inclusion of all girls in the Sierra Leone school system**

*This National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools seeks to ensure that schools in Sierra Leone are accessible to all children, in particular those children who have typically been excluded or pushed to the margins. The policy is driven by a vision of justice and equity for Sierra Leone and the imperative that education is critical to reducing cycles of poverty and breaking down all stigma including around disability, pregnancy, or parental status. Sierra Leone National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools, Summary 2021, found on [this page on the Purposeful website](#).*

While inclusion in programming is critical, we cannot overlook the social, systemic and patriarchal reasons why this group of girls are not in schools with their peers. Government policies and practice must change as a starting point.

The introduction of the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools was a watershed moment for groups, such as girls with disabilities, who have been pushed out of school or never given the opportunity to even start. While we reflect on how Disability Justice is showing up in our programming work, we must see this programming as a stop-gap to girls realising social justice - a band aid that the next generation of girls will not need because national policies and practices include them in the systems that purport to serve them.

And so, while we programme, we're also advocating, influencing and coalition building - with girls, young feminists, partners and allies, in Sierra Leone and beyond. Together with partners in the Coalition for Girls' Education, we played a key role in

the journey that led to this policy - a journey that focused on lifting the ban on pregnant girls attending school and taking exams, but ended with a policy win for all girls, including girls with disabilities.

*“Years of organising and strategic engagement led to the overturning of the ban. Purposeful led the public call - we drafted the first petitions, met with leaders, mobilised efforts that led to the ECOWAS court win. We organised a coalition to push against the ban, led consultations and using evidence, publicly debated and challenged the ban. We then went a step further and worked closely with Minister Moinina David Sengeh and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education on the Education Task Force, chairing the committee that reviewed and recommended the overturning of the ban.*

*We led in researching and drafting the Radical Inclusion in Schools Policy that is now adopted and is being implemented by the Government. We are overwhelmed with joy to see all the positive benefits that the country continues to accrue from resisting dogma and following the science - pregnancy is not contagious, and no, pregnant girls in schools won't lower the standard of education. We argued that the opposite was actually true - standards will go up, pregnancies would drop and students would pass.*

*We also knew that this policy could not be just for this group of girls, that we were in a unique moment to shine a light on the many children who are excluded or pushed from school - including girls with disabilities. We are not there yet as a country but we are moving in the right direction.”*

- Chernor Bah, Co-Founder and Co-CEO Purposeful

With the policy in place and implementation underway, we continue to watch, debate, support, advocate, praise (when it is due), hold to account, and challenge. And all the while, we continue to centre girls and young feminists in this work.

Read our press statement on the lifting of the ban [on Purposeful's Facebook page](#).

### **Aminata's story of resistance**

As a girl with a disability, Aminata shares how a life of discrimination caused her to lose sight of her own value, leading to a life of isolation and vulnerability. A mentor, seeing Aminata begging, invited her to join a Girls' Circle Collective session at the safe space. This mentor's action transformed Aminata's life. Leaning into her voice and power, Aminata went on to challenge discrimination against all people with disabilities in her community, leading to community by-law protecting people with disabilities from harassment and abuse. Her actions have opened up decision-making platforms to her and her friends.

*"I have learnt that women have many rights. I have learnt that there is ability in disability. Our mentor taught us that disabled people have rights, that we should be bold to demand our rights because we deserve to be respected in our community. In the drama, Mariatu was counselling Sia on her rights to report any violation against her to the nearest police station... She helped me learn about my rights, and how to use my voice to secure my rights.*

*People were mocking our children in school because they have disabled parents. I was worried this would derail my child from acquiring education. I had to make my report to the Director of the Camp where we live. I told him not only about what happened to my children, but also about our rights as disabled people to be free from this mocking in our community. The Director summoned the entire Community to address this behaviour.*

*I was given the opportunity to talk and I said to everyone there that their children are mocking our children and their parents aren't doing anything about it. The Director implored the Chief to make laws against such behaviour. That meeting put an end to that ugly behaviour and it doesn't continue any more.*

*Now the community involves us in any community undertakings. We were informed about plans to construct a road and we made our inputs which were endorsed. Formerly, they looked at us as idlers and we had to tell them that they may not understand the seriousness of what we are about because they are not involved. Today, I am feeling good and respected in my community.”*

## **Reflections and Considerations**

The power of representation is undeniable in this context - we see, hear, and feel how girls with disabilities are realising and seizing their power, inspired by Sia, but also how Sia's character is challenging everyone to change their own narratives and beliefs about disability. We also know that representation within mentorship has power at the individual and collective level - providing young women with disabilities

with access to critical resources to take action within their own lives, while simultaneously challenging community level norms about people with disabilities.

From a practical implementation perspective, we're still learning what it means to fully integrate a Disability Justice framework to this work and offer up some considerations for what we'd do differently in the future or how we're adapting. We recognise that many of these are not new but we believe that by naming them, we not only hold ourselves accountable to do better but they may help others to reflect on their own practices.

- ***Listen to girls with disabilities as the experts of their lived experience*** - a mantra across our work that we're trying to be more intentional about, including ensuring that their wisdom is part of our learning work.
- ***Give girls with disabilities the platform to share their own stories.*** The protectionist approach to programming is often more extreme when looking at the intersectionality of disability and gender but we must resist this - we know that girls and young women with disabilities are powerful storytellers and advocates, given the space and opportunity.
- ***Invest time and resources to find girls with disabilities.*** For communities, like the rural ones we work in in Sierra Leone, we cannot assume that girls with disabilities will be able to access interventions and programmes designed for them. Including the Washington Group Short Set is essential for accurate data - 6% of the 15,000 out-of-school adolescent girls in Girls' Circle Collectives have some type of disability. Had we simply included a direct

question on disability, due to a combination of stigma and limited access to health services, we would not have identified so many girls.

- ***Consider how girls with disabilities can be more than programme participants.*** Mentors with disabilities are important role models in their communities, reinforcing the messages delivered via the radio drama and talkshow, and challenging negative narratives. We know that disabilities are diverse and intersect with multiple identities and we are actively looking to represent girls and young feminists with different disabilities in our radio broadcasts.
- ***Leverage flexible resources and assistive devices*** from wheelchairs and crutches, to glasses and hearing aids. Sierra Leone is massively underserved and we are looking at how we can meet some of these needs and/or make linkages to other organisations.
- ***Tailor training to be inclusive of people with disabilities,*** especially safeguarding training, to enable our teams, partners and mentors to think about how they are being inclusive of people with disabilities in their work. Rather than standalone, incorporating additional information or sections into existing training makes it more integrated.
- ***Programming must go hand in hand with advocacy.*** If we don't invest in advocacy and coalition building, we will never dismantle the power structures that continue to oppress and exclude.

We now look forward to the next five years and beyond. As an organisation, as a funder and fundraiser, as a partner and as individuals, we are on a journey of unlearning and learning - we're evolving how we work and who we are to be stronger

allies to girls, young feminists and activists with disabilities. This means a commitment to continuing to find structural ways to deepen inclusion across our work; and through it all, it means centring the voices and expertise of the girls, mentors and young activists with disabilities who are working every day to build a world that is more inclusive and accessible, safe and free and full of all of the boundless possibilities they deserve.

We will continue to build the skills and knowledge of our people and partners to put disability accessibility and inclusion first, to create physical and virtual spaces that ensure people can meaningfully participate, and, critically, directly resource the resistance of the disability activists and collectives at the forefront of this work. Ultimately, we are committed to working toward Disability Justice, knowing that the principle of intersectionality is essential to this work and that working to dismantle ableism as individuals and as an organisation, is central to our collective liberation.

## **Acknowledgements**

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### **Voices/Quotes**

We intentionally limit edits to girls' and mentors' voices and, in the case of mentors, their written reports. This extends to grammar and phrasing. Even with translation, we try to remain true to their words. The voices presented in this report have been translated from several different languages, including Krio, Mende and Temne

### **Disclaimers**

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

Girls' Circles Collectives is also supported by Irish Aid, however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect their official policies.

## **Further information**

Follow our social media channels for more insights and learning from our work. If you have a specific question about this work or report, please email us on

[info@wearepurposeful.org](mailto:info@wearepurposeful.org)