

Inside the Circle: Building power through girls' collectives in Sierra Leone

Watch the [Inside the Circle Film](#).

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About this Report

Girls' Circles Collectives, held by Purposeful, have been transforming the lives of girls, mentors, communities, and partners for two years. Reaching over 15,000 out-of-school adolescent girls in six districts of Sierra Leone, we feel, hear, and see this transformation.

Through narrative research methods, this report seeks to unpack transformation at the individual, collective, community and structural level, while also reflecting on how the different aspects of our work to build power with girls in Sierra Leone contribute towards this change. We do this as part of our deep commitment to reflective practice in our work with girls.

The report is made up of three parts:

Part 1 unpacks the backdrop against which out-of-school adolescent girls agitate and resist, drawing on rich learning and insights generated through the journey of this work.

Part 2 focuses on HerStories and what we learn directly from girls' stories, about shifts in the world around her.

Finally, Part 3 explores how and why a feminist power building approach to girls' work is resulting in tangible transformations in girls' lives, towards a world where all of them – all of us – can build lives of safety, dignity and meaning.

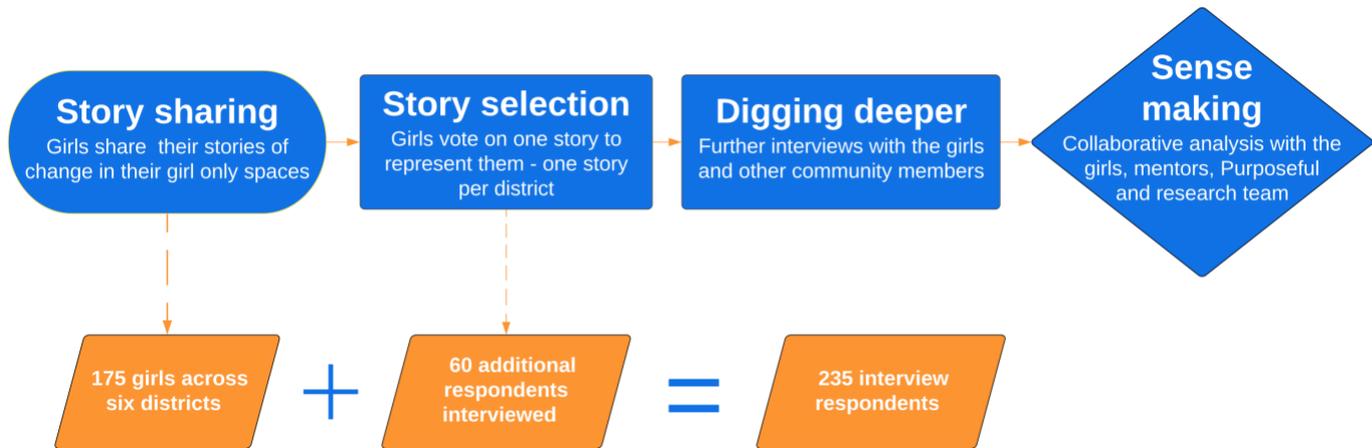
Methodology

Nestbuilders International (NBI), a Sierra Leonean research organisation, was contracted by Purposeful to independently collect girls' stories. This report is the result of that work, with Purposeful layering in context and additional data sources to further affirm and build an understanding of why this work is powering girls' abilities to create changes in their own lives and in the world around them.

Using the Most Significant Change methodology to capture girls' voices

Focused on amplifying the impact of Girls' Circles Collectives on the lives of girls, NBI tailored the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach to select and document HerStories. Grounded in participatory storytelling, NBI used this approach to shift power and amplify the voices of the girls, mentors, and their communities. By focusing on girls' lived experiences, the data collection approach puts girls in a position to control what is captured and learned.

By leveraging the deep tradition of storytelling through MSC, in a space where girls feel safe, surrounded by other girls and mentors whom they trust, they rewarded us with rich details about the impact of the Girls' Circles Collectives on their lives. Read more about this process in [Appendix 1](#).



1. **Story sharing:** Girls share their stories of change in their girl only spaces
 - 175 girls across six districts
2. **Story selection:** Girls vote on one story to represent them – one story per district
3. **Digging deeper:** Further interviews with the girls and other community members
 - 60 additional respondents interviewed, 235 interview respondents in total
4. **Sense making:** Collaborative analysis with the girls, mentors, Purposeful and research team

Layering in additional insights and data sources

For over two years, Purposeful and partners have been working with girls and mentors to understand their stories of change, learning and challenges. At different junctures throughout this report, we provide additional findings and data from across a range of data sources. These include:

- Girls' Circles Collectives Baseline Study – the State of Out- of-School Girls¹. report – a survey conducted with 2,239 girls from Girls' Circles Collectives in October 2020.
- Mentors' quarterly reflections – submitted by mentors via KoboCollect². on a quarterly basis, providing mentors with the opportunity to share stories and reflections.
- Girls' Survey (October 2021) – largely mirroring the baseline survey, this was a small-scale survey conducted with 100 girls who were also interviewed as part of the baseline study.
- Partner reflections, check-ins and interviews – In June 2021, we held in-depth reflections with partners on their experience working on Girls' Circles Collectives and working with Purposeful. This is further complemented by monthly check-ins with partners and interviews focused on their transformation (February 2022).

- U-Report Poll – housed by UNICEF Sierra Leone, U-Report is a free SMS tool, designed for community engagement. SMS polls and alerts are sent out to a group of people signed up as U-Reporters. We conducted a poll in August 2020 and again in December 2021 to understand the wider reach and impact of Karo Kura Konection and Kompin.

An overview of Girls' Circles Collectives

Girls' Circles 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 feminist life skills curriculum
2. Young women mentors
3. Girl-centred media, which includes a radio drama and talkshow called Karo Kura Konection and Kompin

Purposeful has been making experimental grants to girl-led collectives and young activists in Sierra Leone for five years. Based on these learnings and with additional resources secured, we introduced a new offering to girls in Girls' Circles in 2022 to include:

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.

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, Moyamba, 2016

See [Appendix 2](#) for more information about the Girls’ Circles Collectives approach

A glimpse inside the Circle

- Girls decide how they spend their refreshment budget. They cook, they save, they strategise.
- Discussion and lifeskills guides support mentors to take girls on a journey of analysis and consciousness raising.
- Young women mentors with access to information (smartphones), opportunities (skills and knowledge development) and financial assets (stipends) support group of adolescent girls.
- Girl-centred media broadcasts twice a week on nearly 40 stations and is sent directly to over 600 mentors. A cast of drama characters model new behaviours, challenge social norms and offer up an alternative – a new narrative about girls.

- Autonomous girl-only spaces bring together girls in ways that enable them to analyse the roots of their oppression, accessing assets and resources to bring to life their strategies for change.
- Micro-grants are being rolled out across girls acting as collectives, providing unrestricted resources for their organising.
- Trusted adult allies support mentors and girls to navigate challenges they face.
- Girls imagine and create new realities for themselves driving social and systemic change for all girls.

Part 1: The context - girls' realities

Girls' Circles Collectives focus on the most marginalised girls in Sierra Leone. Out-of-school girls are pushed to the margins of their communities and fall through the cracks of national progress and international funding. The lives of this cohort of girls are characterised by multiple and intersecting hardships, rooted in patriarchal oppression.

And yet this is only one part of the story of girlhood. In every community across every district of the country, girls are finding ways to resist the violence of their everyday lives and to organise with other girls towards a better kind of future. It is against the backdrop of these two truths about girls and girlhood – of their deep vulnerability and inherent power – that this initiative was born.

In this next section, we draw on data from global and national-level sources, as well as our own data and research, including the State of Out-of-School Girls report.

Girls are living lives of profound violence

It is not an exaggeration to say that out-of-school girls in Sierra Leone are living on the frontlines of a crisis of violence that is both invisible and all-consuming in its sheer universality. They are not afforded the same privileges and freedoms as their male peers; their bodies and liberties are controlled, and their safety and dignity are consistently at risk. The manifestations of patriarchy are all too real and are especially apparent in the lives of out-of-school girls.

Girls are faced with extreme violence as part of their everyday realities. This is further compounded by the centring of the same girls in a cycle of blame for the acts perpetrated against them, and the patriarchal systems and structures that prevent girls from securing justice when their rights and autonomy have been violated: Sexual violence – including rape and incest – are a near-universal feature of girls' lives in this cohort.

- Out of 170 countries, Sierra Leone sits at the bottom at 161, on the global Women Peace and Security Index. See [endnote 3](#).
- An estimated 62% of girls and women (age 15-49) report having experienced physical or sexual violence, according to the 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (SLDHS).
- According to the State of Out-of-School Girls Report, one in four girls (25%) say that girls experience rape as a form of violence in their community.
- In the same report, 60% of girls agree that 'a woman should accept violence in the home to keep the family together'.

Transactional sex is a common and culturally accepted feature of survival. In a survey of 100 out-of-school girls in October 2021, almost half of the girls (45%) say that girls have sex in exchange for money, food, or another service. Unable to access any alternative means of survival for themselves, their families and their own children, girls' bodies are commodified.

"Girls get pregnant because of poverty, and they find food for their parents that make men seize advantage of them because of poverty and they don't have anybody to

give them money. The only thing they can do is to give themselves to men so that what they want, the men give them.”

Mentor (age 20), Bonthe

“They're an instrument to get us the men into trouble.”

Male U-Reporter

“Most of the adolescent girls today are being [subjected to] violence, rape and do such thing to them as if they are not a human being.”

Mentor (age 17), Karene

Around the world, child marriage transcends borders, faiths, and socio-economic status. It threatens the lives and futures of girls, robbing them of their ability to make decisions about their lives, disrupting their education, threatening their health, making them more vulnerable to violence, discrimination, and abuse. In Sierra Leone, the legal space around the issue is fraught – the laws intended to protect both girls and boys from child marriage, putting age of consent at 18, are contradicted by the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, giving parents, guardians and in some cases, government officials, the power of making waivers to the age of consent.

The State of Out-of-School Girls report finds that:

- Almost one in three girls (32%) are currently married or cohabiting, which increases to 36% if the lockdoor arrangement (like an engagement) is included.

- The average age of marriage is 14.6 years old.

Believing their new husbands to hold all the power, this practice often places girls in a cycle of culturally-accepted statutory and marital rape – girls are unable to say no or assert their bodily autonomy.

Globally, Sierra Leone has among the highest rates of FGM, itself a profound form of sexual violence. Recent data, while indicating progress, shows that over eight out of ten women (83%) between 15 and 49 years old have undergone FGM (SLDHS 2019). This practice is perhaps the clearest physical manifestation of patriarchy in the lives of girls and women in Sierra Leone. Accepted both culturally and religiously, it is a taboo to even talk about it or the Bondo society that surrounds it. The act is intended to curb sexual desire and sexual enjoyment. It is seen as key to preparing girls for marriage and maintaining their chastity for an unknown man in the future. The reality is that it puts their lives in immediate and ongoing physical danger – they may die during the act of cutting or they may die or suffer serious bodily injury during childbirth. The mental health consequences are less established statistically but are known to include depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). See [endnote 4](#).

While a social movement is steadily growing and gaining momentum around the issue in Sierra Leone (see [endnote 5](#)), the situation for this cohort of girls is unlikely to change. The SLDHS 2019 data shows that FGM is more common among women with no education and in the lowest wealth brackets.

“If you don’t talk to the rural woman, we’ll find it difficult to move forward... we want to make sure that women in the rural community give priority to education. We realise we have more Bondo bushes in rural communities than schools, than hospitals. If we want to change their attitude, we need to bring education to their doorstep.”

Rugiatu Nenneh Koroma, Bondo Without Blood documentary

It is essential that we name these practices as what they are: violence. The term “harmful traditional practices”, coined in the formalised development space, obscures the realities of life for those surviving the practice, protects the systems that perpetuate them and desensitises the reader to the reality. We’re extracting the concepts of child marriage and FGM from this development jargon and naming them as violence in our work.

Girls face systemic barriers to accessing education

Education is one of the few pathways out of a cycle of poverty and abuse for girls. While the policy environment for education in Sierra Leone is improving, this generation of girls is unlikely to benefit from the ambitions outlined in the Radical Inclusion in School Policy or the Free Quality School Education initiative. According to the State of Out-of-School Girls Report, 43% of girls interviewed have never been to school. Of those who have been to school, only 7% made it to senior secondary level, with 59% dropping out or being pushed out at one of the primary grades, and 35% leaving during junior secondary level.

“My parents did not put me to school. We have no school in our village.”

Girl (age 17), Bonthe

“My dad passed away when my mum was pregnant with me. My mum brought me to her aunt when I was just a kid. My mum never showed up or sent for me anything since then. My aunt does not have the upper hand to put me to school.”

Girl (age 16), Moyamba

Girls can struggle to see their own value

In addition to depriving girls of life choices, girls’ exclusion from school impacts their self-worth and sense of belonging. Isolated from a potential network of peers and friends, out-of-school girls withdraw into themselves and share that they feel a profound sense of loneliness and hopelessness about the future. This is further compounded by the low levels of literacy associated with this cohort.

“I used to feel bad about myself when I dropped out of school because of teenage pregnancy.”

Girl (age 18), Western Area Rural

The situation is even more extreme for girls with disabilities in these communities. More vulnerable to violence, abuse and neglect, they are also subjected to extreme discrimination and harassment in their streets, including from other girls. There are limited options for out-of-school girls to embark on alternative journeys. On the margins of the margins, in communities where there is already so little, accessing informal education or vocational skills training is only a dream.

- 47%: Almost half of the girls say that girls in their community experience violence.
- 1 in 3 girls interviewed are married or cohabiting.
- Average age of marriage is 14 years old.
- 43%: Nearly half of the girls interviewed have never been to school.
- 57%: Over half of girls say they cannot write at all.
- 62%: Almost two out of three girls say they cannot read at all.
- 48%: Less than half of the girls who went to school have taken a government exam. See [endnote 1](#).

But this is only one part of the story

Even against this harsh backdrop, we know that girls find ways to resist and strategise as individuals and collectively. This resistance is often unrecognised because it usually happens informally and is often unknown to those around them. Indeed, the idea that girls in Sierra Leone are passive victims waiting for formal systems structures and programmes to save them is quite simply wrong. Every day we see and hear from girls who are gathering together, organising with each other, modelling even just for moments a radically different way of being together in the world.

Girls' Circles Collectives are designed to work in and with the organic structures around which girls are already organising and to provide them with some of the skills, expertise, political ideas, and critical resources needed to amplify and compound what is already there. It works towards a strategy that understands

collective power as the greatest protective force against lives of domination and exploitation. Towards a vision that is defined by girls and their mentors. Towards a world where girls are living lives of safety, dignity, and autonomy. Towards a new kind of world.

Part 2: Understanding Circles of Change around the girls

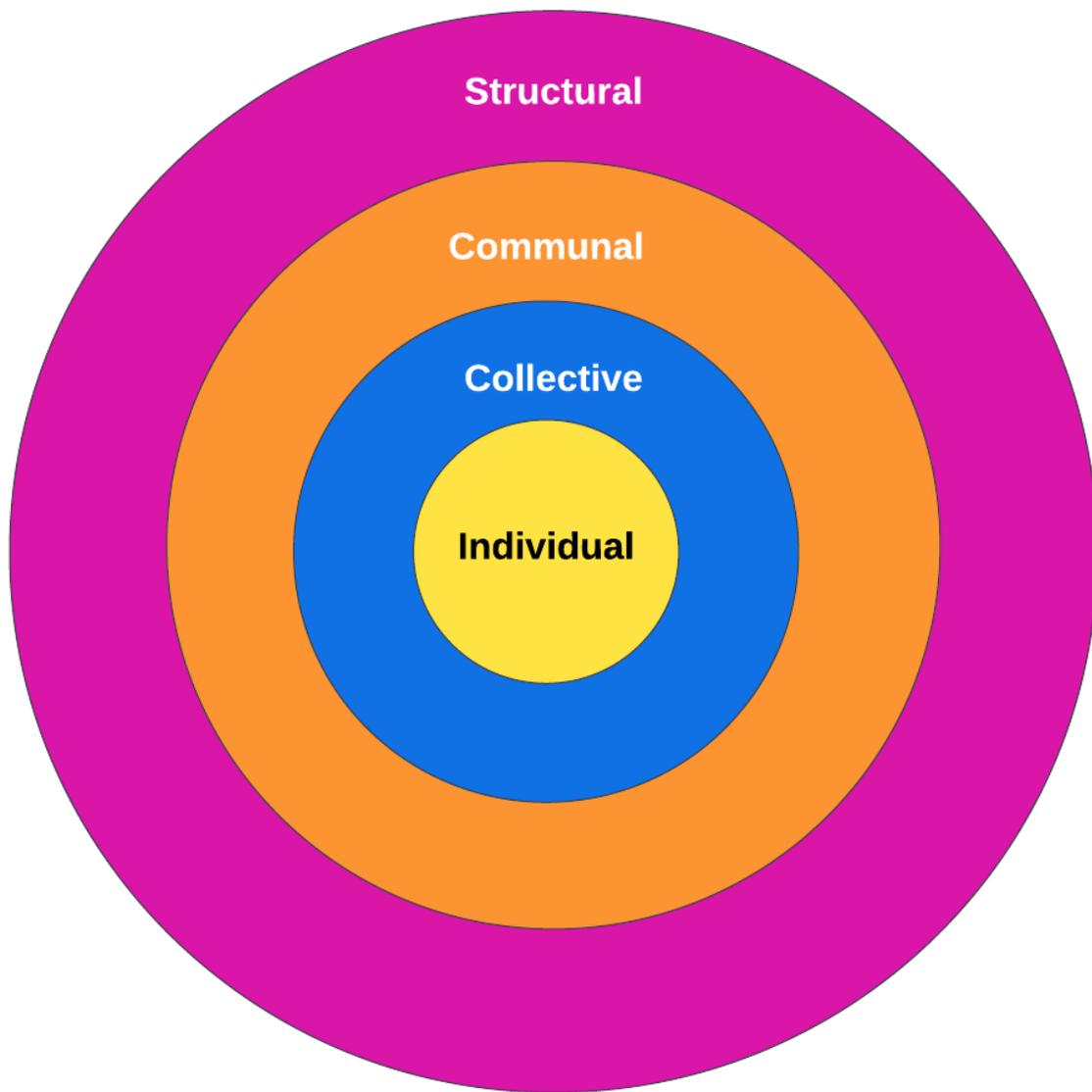
Through their circles, girls are building confidence, connecting with their friends and mentors, and imagining alternatives for themselves and their children. They are beginning the complex and urgent process of analysing the world around them, asking why things are the way they are, and beginning to plan for how they might be made different. Girls are stepping into their power and as they do, re-shaping and re-making the world around them.

Across the stories captured in this part of the report – and through analysis of the 175 stories in the overall research sample – we see the multi-layered contribution to change Girls' Circles Collectives are making.

At the individual level, girls are more happy, confident, and hopeful about the future. They are collectivising with other girls, building networks of social solidarity, and increasing their collective bargaining power. They are stepping into new roles in their communities – where they are claiming their power and negotiating for access to assets and services from which they have previously been distanced. And they are affecting change at the structural level – pushing back against oppressive systems and practices, and demanding justice from state and traditional authorities.

As all of this happens, cultural notions of girlhood are already showing signs of shifting – first off in the language of partners and adult allies, in community stakeholders, and amongst girls themselves. As the initiative continues, we are beginning to see the very earliest signs of how this might ladder up to changes in normative behaviours too. In this section of the report, we offer six significant stories

of change to bring to life the contribution to impact Girls' Circles Collectives are making across these four levels. These levels of change are overlapping multidirectional and mutually reinforcing.



- **Individual:** Hear from Fatu about how she started a business and is providing for herself and her family.
- **Collective:** Meet Adama, who, supported by her mentor and a local woman volunteer, pushed back against her family's plans for her child marriage. Marie, Sento, and Fatu share how they're working together to create an

income and challenging negative narratives about girls in their community by doing so.

- **Communal:** Hawa reflects on how she resisted child marriage, supported by her mentor and the local partner, resulting in a community by-law, prohibiting all child marriage. Ami shares how she used her voice and power to secure a community by-law against the harassment of people with disabilities.
- **Structural:** Meet Musu, who overcame systemic barriers to access justice for a young survivor of rape - the perpetrator was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Girls in her community report that violence is reducing.

Individual

Through connection, consciousness-raising and critical assets, Girls Circles Collectives are changing the life-trajectory of individual girls across Sierra Leone

Reaching over 15,000 girls through Girls' Circles Collectives, we frequently hear stories of change at the level of individual girls. This ranges from girls returning to school and taking up a method of family planning to understanding more about their rights, power, and voice.

Across the implementation districts, Western Area Rural is the most urban in nature – a setting where many people from across Sierra Leone come to, in the hopes of securing education and/or employment in Freetown. The result is a community that is often transient, less trusting of its neighbours, and with less social cohesion. Over the course of the last two years, we have seen this play out in this programme, and

we've observed less collective-level transformation compared with other districts, with many girls, like Fatu, opting to focus on individual-level action, rather than collective action with the girls in the clubs.

HerStory #1: Fatu's Story, Western Area Rural

At the age of 19, Fatu has experienced more loss than many do in their lifetimes. At a young age, she lost her parents and trusted family members, forcing her to leave school and live with an aunt who took advantage of her vulnerable situation. She forced Fatu into a sexual relationship with a man in exchange for small sums of money.

"I completed my junior schooling and sat the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) until [my father] died. My mother later died. When my elder brother died, I had to move in with my aunty. She forced me into a relationship. I refused, but the man would give her a little money, like Le. 15,000 (£1.00) or Le. 20,000 (£1.50). I had no choice because I had no other place to go... This went on and on until I became pregnant for the first time. This only caused [my aunty] to increase her maltreatment towards me. I had to go live with the man in his house."

Fatu gave birth to a daughter. While it took her some time, she eventually found the power to leave the relationship with her daughter's father. Later, while doing some petty trading in her community, Fatu met a man she came to trust and then marry. However, all was not as it seemed.

When we first met, I asked him if he had a woman, he said no. I became pregnant with his child. At seven months pregnant I discovered he already had a wife. His first wife was really horrible. My grandmother advised me to be submissive to this elder wife. Every morning, I would greet her, clean, cook and do all necessary housework. But it still brought no peace between us.

I asked [my husband] to give me money so I could start a business, but he refused. I asked for money for health care for my daughter, but he refused again. Since one of his sisters is a gardener, I pleaded with her to help me with 'potato ropes'. When it was ready for harvest, I went with it to the market, and I made Le. 12,000 (£0.75). I had to spend all this profit when my first daughter fell sick.

During this time, Fatu started to attend a Girls' Circle. She shared that she took what she heard and learned to strategise and take action to try to get her daughter medical help. Unfortunately, despite her efforts, her daughter died, and she went on to lose another child, a son who became sick and died within a day. In early 2021, Fatu gave birth to another son, and she shared that her husband became a better partner and father but that she can also stand up to him when she needs to.

"When I started to listen to the radio programme, I began to feel better. The story of Mariatu, Sia and the others made me feel happy and revived hope in me that I am not a failure. I believed that if I could copy their footsteps, I would achieve something and make my life useful and be a stakeholder in the community and contribute to development. It was from the Girls' Circle that I learnt all these business techniques

– borrowing groundnuts from my sister, selling them, and getting the profit, then I joined the ‘osusu’ (saving scheme).

My mentor knows about my story because I confided in her when I was being treated badly by my husband. She kept me motivated to continue attending the programme. Two weeks ago, my child and I were sick and admitted [to hospital], my husband said he had nothing, and I didn’t have any cash at hand as well, the mentor was the one helping me.”

I am doing things for myself now. I no longer beg. The sad and sorrowful moments are all gone. Being idle, you think a lot, but now that I am engaged in doing something. I can now buy whatever I need. I am now a different person to who I was before. I have boosted self-confidence... I think I have power because I can do what men can do and can even face a crowd discussing my rights. Whenever [my husband and I] quarrel or he attempts to take advantage because I am the woman, I stand firm.

Fatu is sharing her learning with her friends, both in and outside the Girls’ Circle, and is taking action to help them navigate challenging situations in their lives.

“I encourage my peers, even those who are not a part of this programme, to be hopeful and to copy what some of us are doing in business. There was a time, a guy proposed to [my friend] and even though she refused, the guy was persistent. I had to intervene and tell him to stop because it doesn’t mean that if a girl says no to you,

you are to become enemies. So, I had to talk to him to be calm. Since then, he became our friend. We are in a positive brother and sister relationship now.”

Fatu is now the breadwinner in her household and challenges her husband to support with childcare. She has forgiven her aunt and she is joyfully preparing to celebrate her son’s second birthday.

Imagine he will leave for work for weeks or months and bring back only Le. 80,000, whereas I will be holding Le. 200,000 or above on my own. And I had even told him to stop going out to hustle since it isn’t paying off. I told him to help me take care of the baby instead. I don’t think [my aunt] is happy for me, no. If she is happy, I will see it in her. Though I won’t consider what she is doing to me and I am not into revenge since she comes from the same womb as my mother.

Now my child’s birthday is fast approaching. Having buried all his siblings, it gives me joy to see him and for that reason, I must celebrate his birthday.

What is Fatu’s story showing us?

- Girls’ Circles Collectives support the most marginalised girls living at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. These girls have little to no social capital and their lives are extremely precarious. Sexual exploitation is common, with many girls going on to have children during their adolescence. Throughout this time, they are centred in a narrative of blame and forced into a life of submission and subservience.

- When girls are forced to leave school, and especially when they have children out of wedlock and as adolescents, there is a profound sense of failure. Their economic marginalisation deepens, and their isolation is compounded.
- Karo Kura Konection and Kompin captures girls' imaginations, storylines are grounded in girls' realities, but characters are modelling new ways of being and responding to this reality in a radical way, inspiring girls to take action in their own lives.
- Mentors play a key role – they provide significant emotional and, occasionally, financial support for girls who often have no one else in their social networks to turn to.
- When a girl's consciousness is raised, they can become powerful advocates for other girls and young women in their social networks, challenging social norms, gender roles, and entrenched patriarchal practices.
- There is a ripple effect when girls and women have access to financial resources. Fatu's story shows how the mentor uses her own resources to help both Fatu and her child during a time of need. Fatu's sister-in-law, the gardener, gave Fatu the resources she needed to kickstart her business and savings contribution in the form of potato seedlings. Meanwhile, Fatu is also supporting and providing for her son, potentially breaking a cycle of poverty as she seeks to give him the best life she can.
- It reminds us of the importance of providing girls not only with tools to connect with other girls and analyse the roots of their oppression, but also with physical assets, such as financial grants and start-up capital. It is this dual approach that is key to building girls' power.

Girls from Western Area Rural share their joy and hopes for the future



Girl (11): “This is a school in my community. It is the place where people learn new things... I want to return to school but my parents do not have money. If there is any opportunity, I would like to go back. [Girls’ Circle] says that education is the key to success. So, I want to go to school so I will be able to help my family.”



Girl (19): “I took this picture because when I started Girls’ Circle, I had a difficult life. But since I became a member and started listening to the stories of Mariatu, Lucy and others, I copied the business they were in and established my own. Although it is yet to expand, through it I can now pay bills on my own without waiting for a man to take care of me or my child.”



Girl (17): "I took a photo of [my mentor] because I want to be like her. The picture tells me that if I work hard, that I will one day be like my mentor. I know my mentor through the Girls' Circle and all the guidance she gives me. If the programme can continue to improve the life of the mentor, then she will be able to work extremely hard to support building our confidence."



Girl (18): “I took this picture because it is what I do to make money for my family... Before now, girls were idle and engaged only in chasing men. But since the [Girls’ Circles Collectives] programme began, there has been real transformation. Most of us now do business. Before we would depend too much on men.”



Girl (11): "This business does a lot in my life for it is through it that we eat, my family and me.... It was as a result of me listening to the radio programme that I went and told my mother that we should begin a business. When I sell and make money, I can buy things that help me to take care of myself. I want help to grow the business because I know I can achieve something big."



Girl (18): “What is in the picture is garden leaves, ‘plassas’ (potato leaves). I choose it as my favourite picture because after growing the garden and harvesting the leaves, I sell it to take care of my child. When I was attending sessions and heard the radio story, I told my mentor that I too want to engage in garden work. She gave me the encouragement to start it, although my business has been slow. I am in need of a lot of things like fertiliser among many other things. I really want people to help me so I can expand my garden and continue my business activities.”

Collective

The collective is catalytic: When girls come together, we see a compound affect in their shared lives

With limited free time and access to spaces, out-of-school adolescent girls are often deprived of a social network or indeed social life outside of the confines of their homes, creating spirals of loneliness for many of the girls we spoke to.

Over the last two years, Girls' Circles Collectives has been intentional about carving out the physical space and time for girls to be together, as well as role modelling through Karo Kura Konection and Kompin what friendship among girls can look like. The solidarity they have formed is an important end in itself, and it has been a powerful springboard for collective action, as the next two stories show us, enabling girls to push back against child marriage and work together to create businesses and generate income together.

HerStory #2: Adama's (16) story, Falaba

Adama grew up in a market community, close to the border with Guinea, in Falaba, a district in northern Sierra Leone. This semi-nomadic region of Sierra Leone is characterised by deep-rooted beliefs in patriarchal customs, traditions, and religious practices.

"I was living with my Mom, Dad and my siblings. I was in class two when our Dad suddenly passed away. My mom got married to an old man after his death and

moved from this community to a worreh, [a rural camp or settlement within grazing land, which allows families to tend to livestock]. At that time me and my younger brother were in school but when we returned home from school, we found that our they had already left, so we followed them [to the worreh]. Last year I decided to come back to this community and fortunately for me I met this Girls' Circle programme and joined.”

Having left school to be with her family, Adama later returned to the market community to live in 2020, as Girls' Circles Collectives was being established. Encouraged by a mentor, she joined a club.

“Whenever we gather in the girl-only space for our session, we play together – we play using skipping ropes that were given to us by the project. I am always with my mentors and the girls. I can ask questions and they teach me about all the things we hear about on the Girls' Circle radio. We listen to the radio show, cook and eat together. Whenever I return home, I think about the teaching and other good things. This always brings me joy.”

Adama shares she has learned a lot about her power and rights through the Girls' Circle, knowledge that would later serve as a catalyst for her resistance.

“Before I was not aware that as a girl child, I have the right to choose what I want from what I don't want. I also learned about the risks involved in early marriage and pregnancy. I learned about the use of contraceptives when you are not ready for childbearing. I also learned about violence towards girls. Listening to Karo Kura,

Lucy tells us about girl power, while Mariatu teaches us about early marriage and she teaches us how we can stand up against it.”

In December 2020, six months after joining the Girls’ Circle, Adama discovered that her family were making arrangements for her marriage. Adama went directly to her mentor with the issue, however the mentor alone was not able to mediate with Adama’s parents. This mentor sought out the support of other mentors and the GEFs, older, respected women in the community. A mentor from this community reflects on the challenges they have faced in addressing the practice of child marriage in their community.

Mentor: “Early marriage was rampant in the community especially among us, the Fullahs, [our ethnic group]. Our people believe that it is better to send daughters into early marriage than to see them get pregnant without a husband. At the early stage of Girls’ Circles Collectives, we started playing jingles on radio stations about early marriage. Parents stopped their girls coming to our sessions, simply because they viewed the programme as one that can encourage the girls to challenge their parents when it comes to discussing issues around marriage. They thought that this would cause the girls to end up becoming pregnant for boys that they are not married to. The mentors, along with the facilitators [GEFs], started visiting mentees and their parents with a clear explanation of the purpose of Girls’ Circles Collectives and in the process, some parents understood and allowed their girls to be part of the programme.

[To support Adama], we, nine mentors and two facilitators [GEFs], visited the parents to discourage them from pushing their girl to early marriage. We played [the Karo Kura Konection and Komin] recording that taught them the dangers of forcing a girl child into early marriage – like how the mother or child could die from pregnancy.”

The role of the GEF was put in place by Purposeful and partners to enhance their network of trusted adults in their communities. She is a community- based, female volunteer, selected by the girls as someone they trust. Across all the Girls’ Circles Collectives communities, they work together in different ways.

Together, the group convinced Adama’s family to abandon the plans for her marriage, but they also abandoned Adama as a member of their family, telling her that she had brought shame and dishonour to them.

“We went together to ask and appeal to my parents not to send me into early marriage. My parents accepted the request of the GEFs and mentors but after that my family members were very angry with me. They said they are angry because I have refused to get married and have called outsiders to intervene in our family matters. They said that I brought shame to the family. Even my brothers in Freetown have malice towards me. They left me alone in this community because I did not accept the early marriage.”

Adama observes that the community around her have mixed feelings about her refusal of the marriage but also feels like change is emerging as a result of her resistance and Girls’ Circles Collectives.

“Some women in the community are saying good things, that [Girls’ Circles Collectives] is teaching some sense. Others are saying that this programme now makes children deny their parents, that it is bad. Some men now treat their wives with respect and that is because of the radio show. Community elders and leaders also treat girls with respect because they know the importance of the programme. They have realised that girls should not be sent to early marriage.”

Despite losing the relationship with her family, Adama stands firm in her decision. She is living with a woman leader in the community and her mentor is supporting her to become a tailor.

“If there was no girl-only space, I would have gotten married because there would have been no place I could have discussed the issue and got support from. Especially when it comes to early marriage, these things were not discussed. Before I was afraid to tell my parents the truth by accepting whatever they tell me, whether it’s good for me or not. I was not bold enough to speak for myself...When I stood up by resisting early marriage, I clearly showed that I can choose what was best for me.

I have built self-confidence. Being in the girl-only space makes all girls in the club feel good, they can see what has happened to me and that also makes them feel confident. We have made an agreement that we should all say no to whatever we are not comfortable with – there was no way I could have said no without everything I learned and without the support of the mentors.

Presently I am living with a woman who is not even my relative, but she's taking good care of me. My mentor has sent me to a place where I can practice tailoring. As I am talking to you now, I am doing tailoring work and that's where I am managing my life.”

Mentors from this community in Falaba report that girls are now negotiating to delay both marriage and initiation into the Bondo society, part of which involves FGM – challenging practices which have historically been off limits in this closed community.

HerStory #3: Marie (19), Sento (14) and Fatu’s (17) story, Karene

Sitting in the North East of Sierra Leone, in a rural community of Karene, Marie, Sento and Fatu reflect on the joy and solidarity they experience with other girls through Girls’ Circles Collectives and how this gives them confidence in their voice.

Marie: “During our sessions, the mentors beat the drums and I sing along with the group and dance. Before, I was too ashamed to speak in front of my friends, but since I joined, I saw that our mentor was able to stand in front of us and speak boldly – I learned that I too can do what she is doing. I now speak with confidence. The Girls’ Circle brings me joy and happiness.”

Fatu: “I was very lonely because I was not going to school but my friend told me about the Girls’ Circle and I wanted to join. We come together with our peers, where we sit, sing and dance. Since I started coming to the sessions, I have no shyness in

me... now my friends have so much respect and value for me. My friends are supporting me in doing business and now I can look to my future with hope.”

Sento: “I made friends in the Girls’ Circle, they are special to me because they teach me many things through the Girls’ Circle that help change me. My friends helped me to change because before I was ashamed to speak.”

Building on this solidarity and confidence, inspired by Karo Kura Konection, and supported by their mentor and local Town Chief, the girls share how they have come together to start a groundnut (peanut) farming business, with the ambition of supporting each other financially.

Sento: “We learned to do business when Titi and Lucy started doing a small garden. We were inspired by these two girls in the radio show, and we started to do our own groundnut farming.”

Fatu: “We met with the Chief for a piece of land, which he gave us. We [prepare it], plant, weed and harvest, together as a group. We take pictures and sing every time we work at our farm. We even take the drum [from the safe space] and use it at the farm for enjoyment. The support from all the girls adds to our strength because we do everything together like contributing our money in agreement and doing all the farming process together. Before we would all be sitting in our own houses alone and doing our work alone. We never imagined we could start a business or do work together.”

Marie: “In one of the meetings we decided to contribute some money and we agreed on Le. 1,000 [£0.11]. The mentor is responsible to keep the money and we use the money to buy groundnuts and make a farm. All of us in the Girls’ Circle went to the land and did some [preparation]. After that, we divided the farm into sections so smaller groups of us could do the digging. Then we planted the groundnut seeds. After some time, we would weed the entire groundnut farm working in groups. Within a short period of time we harvested the groundnut together. We have photos of that to remember. We dried the nuts out in the sun for some time and gave the mentors to keep it for the next season.”

Confronted with the reality of girls taking collective action, their families and community members are reassessing their views of girls. The negative narrative of out-of-school girls being “idle”, with little or no capacity to support themselves is shifting. This shift is felt by both girls and community members.

Sento: “The community people are happy because at first we were not doing anything to help ourselves but since we started farming together this has created a change in our homes and community.”

Marie: “We were maltreated before but because of this programme the way they see and treat us has changed. People now listen to the advice we give to them and our little ones respect us, even our husbands love and support us.”

Male Town Chief (40 years old): “Before the programme we, the parents and other community people, were discouraged about our girls. But now when they are

together in a group, they have started doing things that show us that they are hardworking and are capable of doing great things.”

Male Youth Leader (20 years old): “We now see them as very strong people. We know that if we need their help, they will be able to step in as a group and support us in our youth activities. The most significant change is that they now work together, not like before when girls would malice each other. They have shown they can work together.”

The girls are hopeful for the next harvest, and the one after that. They are committed to continue working in solidarity and hope to grow their business activities. Joining the Girls’ Circle and embarking on collective action with other girls has been a life changing experience for the girls in the group. The girls report feeling more confident and hopeful about their future.

Sento: “I belong to the safe space... I have mentors and friends who are encouraging me to do many good things for my future. I now have respect from my family and I know I can do good things in my life. I believe our business will grow and give us all opportunities in our lives that were not there before.”

Marie: “From farming together I am more respected and I have hope now for my future. I learned how to respect my parents. I also sing now in my church. Even in meetings I can stand up and say important things which are valued.”

Fatu: “I can now use my power at home to lead my little one to follow good steps because now I do business from which I can use to support them. We are feeling very good in our lives, now other girls in the community want to be like us in the Girls’ Circle, working together.”

What are Adama, Marie, Fatu and Sento’s stories showing us?

- Girls internalise the negative narratives and beliefs which surround them – they refer to themselves as idle, “not good” or failing to contribute/be productive in their lives. As we also learned from Fatu’s story in Western Area Rural, there is a profound sense of failure when girls are forced to leave school, especially when systemic and structural factors are not visible to them.
- These negative narratives and beliefs also contribute to how girls see other girls in their community. Before coming to the Girls’ Circle, there was little cohesiveness between this group of out-of-school girls, who, despite their similarities, treat each other with suspicion. By giving girls a dedicated space and time to come together, they overcome their assumptions about each other and form strong bonds
- Girl-centred media can be a powerful force in influencing communities and shifting their views about girls and traditional practices. Having direct access to this media content on their smartphones allowed mentors supporting Adama to draw on the messages when and where they needed to, powering their negotiation with girls’ parents and the wider community. Equally, we see from Marie, Fatu and Sento that the characters in the drama directly

influenced their decision to start farming together, which subsequently challenged how community members perceived them.

- Social capital and adult allies play an important role in enabling girls in both stories to resist. For Adama, her young women mentors and older women community members came together to mediate with her family on her behalf and then stepped in when her family essentially disowned her, providing her with a new home and skills for her future. Accessing land for women can be extremely challenging in Sierra Leone, for Marie, Fatu and Sento, the male Town Chief provides them with access to land to embark on their collective farming activities.
- Joy plays an important role in creating a safe space among girls and contributes to building solidarity among girls. Music, dance and singing embodies joy in Marie, Fatu and Sento's story.
- When girls are given the tools to spark their resistance, their actions challenge cultural conversations and expectations, increasing community support for girls' rights.

Communal

Through individual and collective action, girls are challenging and changing the negative narrative they face in their communities

In some communities, as girls step into their power and question their realities, it is shifting the negative dominant narratives and beliefs that exist about girls in profound ways. In one story, a 14-year-old girl shares her story of resisting marriage, putting into action learning from her time in Girls' Circle, realising her power and leaning on her social network in her fight of survival. A second story focuses on the harassment faced by people with disabilities and shows the change one girl can trigger in a community when she believes in her voice and power.

HerStory #4: Hawa's (15) Story, Bonthe

Hawa recalls how at 14 years old, she found herself in the bush, running, as she heard her parents and extended family searching for her. Earlier that same day, they had gathered at her home, cooking and preparing for her impending marriage.

"I was attending school but the person I was staying with was unable to pay my fees and my mother struggled to afford my fees. So I came home and decided not to go back to school. My father told me if I have decided not to go to school anymore then let me get married. Unknown to me, they had already made the arrangements for me. I went on the run through the bush because I said I won't marry and I left for a village nearby but they pursued me there."

Hawa reflects on how she was able to resist the marriage by applying what she learned about child marriage and maternal and child mortality through Karo Kura Konection and Kompin, knowledge and messages that were reinforced by her mentor. Her relationship of trust with her friends and mentors ensured that her parents and family were not able to execute the marriage.

“Our mentors told us that it is unacceptable for any child to go into early marriage, that gave me the strength to deny the marriage. My power and rights as a girl and the story of Kadie also gave me confidence to reject my parent’s plan and not to accept [the marriage]. Kadie was forced into early marriage and she conceived a baby but couldn’t deliver on her own, she had to go through an operation and even after the operation, the baby struggled to survive.

While I was in the Girls’ Circle, what I heard gave me the strong mind to say I was not going to get married. We have the power to say we were not ready for marriage, even when our mothers say we should get married. That was the power I relied on when I said I was not yet ready to get married.

I went and briefed my mentors and they stood for me and so the marriage didn’t materialise.”

Using her smartphone, Hawa’s mentor immediately called the local partners’ Field Officer, “Aunty Nadia”. Nadia happened to be in a nearby community and came straight away to negotiate the way forward with Hawa’s parents. Nadia called a meeting with Hawa’s parents, the intended husband’s family, and the local Town

Chief. Nadia explained Hawa's right to deny the marriage, the dangers of child marriage and the laws against it. She threatened to have the issue brought to the attention of the legal authorities if her parents did not follow Hawa's wish.

Afraid of the legal consequences, Hawa's parents abandoned the proposed marriage. While Hawa welcomed this result, she was effectively abandoned by her family but supported by a friend from the Girls' Circle.

"My parents were not happy at all. Because of my rejection, my parents decided to disown me. My father told me that from that moment onwards, I am not a part of his family and he kicked me out of his house...He made a public pronouncement to the chief rejecting me as his child. A friend of mine, Sara, accommodated me when I was driven from my parents."

Hawa's resistance, supported by her friends, mentors and Nadia, sparked change in her community for all girls. Hawa believes child marriage and adolescent pregnancy is decreasing, aided by a local by-law passed by the Town Chief as a direct result of her resistance, prohibiting the marriage of any girl under the age of 18. According to him, "what our children are saying about early marriage is true and we have accepted their point and we don't want it anymore".

A by-law is a law made by a city council, local authority and/or local leader, such as a Town Chief, which applies only in their area or jurisdiction. By-laws send a strong message to the community about the political will and views on different issues and in some cases they include legal recourse.

“Before the [Girls’ Circles Collectives] programme, parents were sending their young girls to early marriage. They would do this because of hardship and poverty. They would send us girls to marry oil palm producers and bike riders for them to get money for their daily living rather than sending us to school. Five or more were forced into early marriage, some were younger and some were my age. Before this programme many young girls were involved in early pregnancy. But because many people are now aware and moreover the chief had decreed that no one should force a child to get married without her consent.”

Hawa continues to navigate the relationship with her family but remains optimistic for her future, supported by the network of friends and mentors she has developed through her Girls’ Circle.

“Before, the friend I had sometimes blackmailed me and gossiped about me to others but now I have friends who understand me better. [We have] things in common and we share knowledge that can help to grow our friendship. I wasn’t used to public speaking before the Girls’ Circle but now I am bold to talk in any gathering. I am okay, I am happy and I am accepted.”

HerStory #5: Ami’s (19) Story, Bombali

Living in an urban community a city in Bombali, in the northern province of Sierra Leone, Ami shares how her younger years as a girl with a disability as a result of polio were characterised by discrimination and hardship.

“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 told my mother and she would always encourage me.”

Ami’s mother moved her from their village to an urban community to attend junior secondary school, however they struggled to find accommodation due to the stigma associated with disability. Her mother was undeterred, and eventually secured a place for Ami at a camp for people with disabilities.

“Even when I settled in this camp, I felt bitter. I had no joy. I felt insecure around my peers because I believed they would gossip about me if I shared my problems with them. All these issues prevented me from going to school. 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.”

As a girl with a disability, Ami sits at an intersection of multiple forms of oppression and despite having a supportive family, she struggled to overcome the stigma and discrimination she faced and retreated into a life of social isolation. A mentor from a Girls’ Circle saw Ami in the street and reached out to her to join the Girls’ Circle that had been set up in the camp. This experience challenged Ami’s perceptions about herself and other people with disabilities.

“One day, the mentor came and talked to me. She said, ‘at seventeen, please stop being discouraged with your life. Stop sitting like this.’ She told me that I am a human being and deserving of respect in the community.

[In the space], we share stories, listen to the drama and respond to questions asked from the stories we hear. Mentors give us counsel when necessary and console us when the need arises. We play, sing, dance and joke. [Mentors] come to check on us outside the meeting sessions – especially if we are sick. They will come and give us a little token and spend some time with us.

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.”

One day, Ami discovered that the children were being bullied at school because of her disability. Afraid that this would cause her children to leave school like she had done, Ami took action.

“I reported the incident to the Director of the Camp, I also told him about our rights as disabled people to live free from 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."

Ami's action culminated in a by-law in her community, an action that now protects everyone with a disability in her community from mocking and harassment. Ami and her friends in the Girls' Circle proactively ensure that the by-law is adhered to.

"One time our friend complained that someone mocked her, we mobilised as a group to take action against that person. We went to her and warned her strictly not to repeat such an action again or else she will face the law."

Moreover, Ami and other girls with disabilities in her Girls' Circle are engaging in community-level decision making and consultation processes.

"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."

Ami now lives with her older sister and her children. She sees and feels her own value and her Girls' Circle is making plans to ensure they can continue to support each other.

“Last week when I was sick, the mentors together with other mentees came to see me and they contributed some money for me. I felt good when I saw them. I realised I am part of a group that cares. There are plans on the way to have an emergency fund should anything happen to our members.

Today, now, I can consider myself as a human being although, yes, I am a physically challenged person I still have rights.”

Karo Kura Konection and Kompin is shifting attitudes and behaviour towards people with disabilities

As seen in this story, discrimination towards people with disabilities in Sierra Leone is profound. When it intersects with entrenched negative attitudes towards out-of-school girls, it puts girls with disabilities at this increased risk of violence and abuse, limited socio-economic opportunities, including access to health and education and social isolation. Using a house-to-house effort to identify out-of-school adolescent girls facing multiple vulnerabilities, 6% of the girls enrolled into Girls' Circles Collectives have a disability.

Sia: A girl with a disability, resilient despite the challenges she faces and a central character in the Girls' Circle and friendship circle

Largely attributable to the character of Sia in the drama, 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
- One in two (50%) of girls say their views on girls with disabilities have changed since joining Girls' Circles

"I used to laugh and mock disabled people. There was a cripple in my community, and we used to laugh and beat him. 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), 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), Moyamba

What are Ami's and Hawa's stories showing us?

- Girls' Circles Collectives supports girls who are the most marginalised in their communities. Ami's story personifies the situation which many out-of-school girls with disabilities in Sierra Leone will find themselves in: pushed to the fringes of their communities, their self-worth is decimated by the negative narratives that surround them and they are pushed into lives of violence and abuse.

- For many adolescent girls in Sierra Leone, particularly in rural and deeply traditional communities, girls' choices and futures are viewed in extremely narrow terms – for Hawa, her family saw two options for her, formal education or marriage. Ultimately, Hawa did not have a choice between these two options, poverty made the decision on her behalf, resulting in her leaving school.
- Young women mentors are given the tools and assets to be change-makers in their community. Ami may never have come to the Girls' Circle were it not for a proactive mentor who did not restrict herself to the recruitment guidance provided by Purposeful and partners, enabling her to find the girls who are truly pushed to the farthest fringes of their communities. Hawa's mentor was able to take immediate action because of her access to a smartphone. This asset plays a critical role in both enabling mentors to access the content they need for their Girls' Circle and communicating directly with Purposeful and partners.
- Using drama and stories to role model alternative views and realities is an effective tool for behavioural change. For Ami, the role of Sia inspires girls with disabilities while also challenging the biases others hold about people with disabilities in their communities.
- Combining girl-centred media with mentors and girl-only spaces is a powerful way to raise girls' consciousness through introducing and reinforcing key messages, in this case about girls' rights and child marriage.
- When girls are supported to step into their power and voice, some communities are ready to listen and act to support them.

- When girls have social capital, their individual resistance can lead to collective action, sparking the dismantling of value systems that position girls as subordinate and challenge the many forms of violence that show up in girls' lives, including child marriage. In this community, the hope is that the by-law will be enforced and protect other girls and boys from child marriage.
- Adult allies can play an important role in girls' resistance, for Hawa, the Field Officer, Nadia, was critical to negotiating with her family and the local Town Chief. A combination of Nadia's role and girls voicing their opposition to early marriage created an allyship with the Town Chief, who went on to pass a by-law to protect all girls under 18 from child marriage.

What else do we know about Karo Kura Konection and Kompin across Sierra Leone?

While the aim of the girl-centred media is social change at scale, it must be forever grounded in real life stories. The audience must recognise their own lives and characters in the drama, and they must believe what they hear. Since airing, we have constantly assessed credibility and relevance to girls' lives – among girls and mentors, this has been consistently high. In an October 2021 survey of 100 girls, 97% said that they believe the information they hear on Karo Kura Konection and Kompin and that it is relevant to their lives. Moreso, they understand it.

Girls' understanding is clear when we meet them where they are, when they tell us about the drama and share how they're questioning, collectivising, and resisting. In the same October 2021 survey, nine out of ten girls shared that the radio drama has made them think or behave differently, while the remaining girls say it sometimes

makes them think or behave differently. For many, the change is the ability to use the skills and knowledge they've learned to earn money to support themselves and their families, enabling them to push back against the situations of transactional sex and violence that they are often faced with. For other girls, they're accessing family planning, saying no to marriage, or returning to school.

"I used to be foolish with men for Le5000, now Karo Kura Konection has made me believe that I can work and earn something for myself. I am part of a group that my mentor setup to sell fish."

Girl (18), Bonthe

"When I got pregnant, I was worried, but my mentor encouraged me to take care and visited a clinic because of what Nurse Zainab said about taking care during pregnancy. I didn't take the local herbs my stepmother was providing."

Girl (16), Bombali

"I dropped out of school – the show motivates me to be bold to ask my parents to send me back to school."

Girl (15), Western Area Rural

Mass appeal has always been an aim and we know that across the country, we have a keen secondary audience of listeners. In December 2021, two thirds of U-Reporters (with exposure) asserted that Karo Kura Konection and Kompin makes them behave, feel or think differently towards girls in their communities. While many shared that they now realise the girls have equal rights and are capable of making

decisions about their lives, some male U-Reporters, shared that their newfound knowledge of the concept of consent and laws protecting girls from sexual violence and abuse is changing how they act towards girls.

“It makes me not to use violence against girls, also not to tamper [with] underage [girls].”

Male U-Reporter

Structural

Girls recognise the systems and structures that oppress them and use their voice and power to initiate and secure change

The systems and structures in Sierra Leone are stacked against girls, almost none more so than their ability to access justice and hold perpetrators of violence to account. Multiple barriers stand in their way, from the ability to travel to make a report or visit a health clinic, inadequate clinical management and psychosocial support, family members seeking compensation instead of retribution and the justice system that frequently fails survivors. Stories of survivors and perpetrators being transported on the same bike to the nearest town with services is not unheard of. Girls' dignity and safety is further threatened through the system of failures, as preparators, more often than not, walk free.

The story that follows is one that firmly shifts the role of girls from victims to protagonists of their own future. Girls and their adult allies came together as a collective to confront the rape of a young girl in a way that has never been done in their community – all under the leadership of an 18-year-old girl who was conscious of her value, her voice and her power.

HerStory #6 – Musu's (18) Story, Moyamba district

Today, Musu is an activist and advocate for girls in her community, despite the loss and challenges she has faced during her own adolescence.

“During the Ebola outbreak, I lost my mother and things became difficult for me. I was living with my father, a tailor, the person he worked for wouldn't pay him. It was all on me to hustle in order to take care of him and the home. Then came one foolish guy who impregnated me, but my dad was not mad. He encouraged me and didn't throw me out. Sadly, during the pregnancy, the guy started abusing and maltreating me and began to date multiple women. He said I was dirty because I was pregnant and my peers were not pregnant.”

The man abandoned Musu and she went on to survive a difficult childbirth, involving a caesarian section; she thinks that she was around 14 years old. A couple of years later, one of her friends told her about a Girls' Circle and convinced her to join.

“I told her that I would be ashamed to join because my peers would be there and I didn't want them to laugh at me. I was ashamed. She told me not to be ashamed that the place is for girls and it is the girls that make it. I attend the sessions and I sit, focus and listen. I love the mentors, they helped with my child. Whenever they were paid, they gave me something to help me take care of my child. They knew I didn't have a husband. Karo Kura has made me forget about my struggles.”

Inspired by the radio drama and with the financial support of her mentor, Musu set up a business to support herself and her family. Mentors in this community leverage their stipend to support other girls to start business as well and do collective farming. Girls have started a savings group with their earnings – weekly contributions of Le. 12,000 (equivalent to £0.75) are made by each member.

“I discussed with my mentor to help me with a loan so I can start a business. I told her that I will need 100,000 Le and she told me in the following week she will give it to me, and she didn't disappoint. I sent someone to the market to buy me five cups of pepper, 2 packets of maggi, and salt. Through my own business I can save 50,000 Le up to 100,000 Le without any fear. I joined the osusu (savings) group and I don't hesitate to contribute. The profits I make I save all. Karo Kura encouraged not to be shy but to be confident and bold. I am not ashamed to talk. I can do anything I set my mind to.

I now have the knowledge that we have power as women, we have a future and we have the right to choose, to choose what we want.”

As Musu's world expanded through the Girls' Circle, she also learned more about the violence girls face.

“Violence is not only when your mom or husband flogs you. When you are with your husband and you are exhausted, but he is desperate for sex, denying him might make him rage and start to beat you like you are his property. That is a big, big violence. [In other situations] he might say I am back-talking and give a dirty slap. I know it because it happened to me. I got that slap once. That is another form violence.

If parents push a girl to the street, a guy might call her to help her because she is crying, but it will not be for nothing. The man might call her and say come stay with me and clean and I will give you the money. The girl can stay the whole night, and

her parents will agree because they want the money to make up for the losses. But he will say “for me to give you the money, we must have sex”. The child will be vulnerable. That’s what happens.”

One day, while attending the Girls’ Circle, Musu heard that an 8-year-old girl had been raped in this community.

“In our community, a man raped a young girl while he was helping her to fetch the wood. The child returned home and told her grandmother about it. Her grandmother took her to the hospital. They found out she had been raped. The man was in his home, he left for nowhere. It happened on Saturday at around two in the afternoon. They went to arrest him and he confessed that he did it. They had wanted to deal with it in secret.. that Kuku Jumu Koo [keep it within the family]. The chiefs insisted they report the man [to the police], but the grandmother had no money to pay for transport to pursue the case. So she said it will be better if it’s left as it is. Even though his brothers were not in support of him. They even mentioned that he has been doing it before coming to the village.”

By this time, Musa shared she had been attending the Girls’ Circle for over three months and had learned that girls and women have the right to report perpetrators of violence to the police.

“I first went and met the GEF and told her that in this case we need to take responsibility. Then we went to the grandmother of the child. I told her that I will help

her fight the case. She asked me if I had that power, I said yes! I told her about the Karo Kura. I told her it is our right to take up cases as such.”

To pursue this case, Musu, along with her mentors, GEF and other girls from the Girls' Circle, had to navigate deep-rooted practices that allow perpetrators' families to make a payoff and for the perpetrators to walk free. This involved being resourceful, drawing on their collective financial resources and identifying other allies to support them in their community. Seeing that Musu and the group were determined to pursue the case, the Chief led the community to raise funds to support the case, for example to pay for the girl's medical costs.

“With the mentors, we took the grandmother to the Social Welfare [office] in Moyamba and reported the matter directly. [Using money from our savings], we travelled there on different bikes. Myself, our mentors, the youth leader, the GEF and even the man. We held the man the entire time. We never left him. We needed the youth leader for his manpower, [he helped us to hold the alleged rapist].

The child was taken to the government hospital for immediate treatment, they wrote a report and we took it to the Social Welfare. The Police locked him up and the matter went to court. We went to court three times, but none of his family members attended. Nobody came to speak for him. On the third day, Tuesday, 5th March 2021, we waited until 14.00. This is the day they sentenced him. He was sentenced for 15 years.”

Securing this type of justice in Sierra Leone is a rarity and for a group of girls to do so may be unheard of. Musu reflects on this win for girls.

“[On Karo Kura], Josephine said that no one should rape. That if one rapes, it is a crime against the government. It is not for table talk. Not for village talk. It is a crime that needs to be dealt with by the government. We want to protect our community. We want to rid our community of [rape] totally. So when we pursue this case, we want the next man to think that if he does the same thing, he will know what will happen to him. Even if it is my brother that does it. It will be the same, we will carry him away. Eventually, it will never happen here because we have made an example.”

This experience represents a strong basis for imagining an alternative future and has given the girls motivation to continue challenging oppressive norms and structures. Following the conviction of the perpetrator, the Girls' Circle has become a sort of social safety organisation in their community. Cases of violence against women and girls are brought to them to address. Under the guidance of the GEF, the girls seek out accused offenders and issue warnings. Given their previous success, they are feared and have since seen a dramatic drop in cases of violence against girls and women in their community.

“We take action because we want any form of violence to end. We have agreed to stick together. As soon as you beat your wife or anyone, we will ensure it doesn't go free. It is now like a by-law. Even the Chiefs are in support of us. The stakeholders,

the youth, and all the family members are happy. The rape has reduced and even the rate of violence has reduced. Girls' Circle is hot like fire, we don't compromise."

A 12-year-old girl affirms Musu's assertion that violence is reducing:

"There were a lot of early marriage in this this community, but the Karo Kura programme has helped to reduce early marriage and rape cases."

A 14-year-old girl lends her voice to this belief as well:

"Previously there was a lot of violence in this community especially the older people. When they meet a young girl in the street, they will touch you in a bad way but this violence has stopped."

As for Musu, she is a leader in her community and is the protagonist of her own story. She is invited to meetings by the Chief on all matters – not only those related to girls' rights.

"My boyfriend used to abuse me in different ways but now, if anyone does that, I will directly report him to FSU. Before now I was also afraid that if I reported him, I might lose him, but not anymore for I now know that I deserve better. I don't allow men to dominate me. I am valued in the community and by the Chief, they send for me for any meetings or programmes in this village."

What is Musu's story showing us?

- Girls face multiple types of violence in their lives and even when they stand up to this violence, the systems that are in place to protect them often fail. This failure is driven by the patriarchal norms which protect men, poverty, and under-resourced systems. Without the basic funds for transportation and healthcare, accessing justice for many girls and women is simply not a possibility.
- When informed, inspired, and collectivised, girls drive transformation in their communities. The power of Musu and the Girls' Circle Collectives to act and challenge seemingly unchangeable power structures was acknowledged and respected by the community. They came together as a collective to confront a heinous act of violence against a young girl in a way that has never been done in their community – all under the leadership of an 18-year-old girl who knew her value, her voice and her power.
- Access to financial resources is a key enabler to girls' resistance. In Musu's story, mentors leveraged their own stipends to support girls to set up small businesses and a collective farm, together they started to contribute to joint savings. This small amount of savings provided Musu with the initial resources required to move to the district headquarters to report the case to the authorities there.
- Adult allies are also important agents in this transformation: Musu saw her GEF as a trusted ally – she plays a critical role in supporting Musu to take the case to the local Chief. The local Chief also supports Maritatu on her journey – he gave her the space to talk and he listened, ultimately acting to support her and the survivor.

In addition -- through partnerships with grassroots organisations operating at the village and district level, we are seeing the many ways in which interaction with a feminist power building approach is shifting the values and behaviours at the organisational level too.

There are five local partners working on the frontlines of Girls' Circles Collectives across six districts. Partners share that through this partnership with Purposeful, they as individuals and as organisations have been transformed in how they view and work with girls. Many of the male team members now recognise the biases they themselves held about both girls and women and assert that this has shifted.

I had a notion that women should be seen and not heard, even my wife, she used to do everything in the home and I tell her what to do, even though she has a Masters. I pushed her to respect me. Men see girls as no one but with Girls' Circles Collectives, we realise that girls are a force to be reckoned with.

Partner Staff

We had a preconceived notion that we must be the big man in their homes, men are superior. This is what the tribe taught, we dominate women, they are in the kitchen to do things for men. When I saw this project, it taught me this is wrong. I realised that those beliefs were not good. I have changed, I believe that girls are powerful.

Partner Staff

Organisationally, they share that their focus on girls has improved, while their safeguarding policies and processes are stronger than ever before. They're also finding space for more women in their organisations – they're hiring more women as

team members and one partner shared that a young women mentor is now one of their board members.

Key factors in these shifts include:

- Working alongside female staff members: Purposeful asked partners to intentionally include women as part of their teams for Girls' Circles Collectives. For some, this was the first time they had worked with women as peers. They shared that they were surprised that women could ride bikes and traverse difficult terrain, doing the same work as their male counterparts. In the same way the girls' action is challenging community members' views about girls, their perceptions that women could not do this work changed because women were given the opportunity to secure jobs on their teams and to challenge these perceptions.

“Because of partnering with you, it has changed our views on girls and on employing female staff. We only had one female, now we can boast of five female employees and we now have female volunteers.”

Partner Staff

- Purposeful as a role model: The Purposeful Girls' Circles Collectives team is predominantly female, as is the entire organisation, including the key decision- makers and managers. This served to inspire the female partner staff, while also confronting male staff members on the capacity and ability of women to do this work.

“In Sierra Leone, most organisations work with more male staff, but seeing how Purposeful as an organisation has stood out in a very short time working with mostly female staff shows that women are capable of doing anything.”

Partner Staff

“We see women among them, in management, if Purposeful has done it, we can follow in their footsteps.”

Partner Staff

- Safeguarding training and support: A key aspect of this work is safeguarding. During the partnership, we worked with partners to strengthen their policies and processes, while also rolling out periodic training. Partners shared that the training made this aspect of the work tangible and raised their consciousness around how they and their colleagues should behave when working with girls and what to do practically when a safeguarding report is made.

“I had a staff member, he was that kind of person who might flog his wife at home. He is local to this community and they believe in male dominance.

When he came and he went to induction training and they shared the safeguarding policy, up to this day, he had totally changed. I go to his home and his wife thanks me for changing his behaviour. This has totally changed his life.”

Partner Staff

“Through safeguarding training, I learned about the principle of working with girls and promoting their rights. Practical examples in the training were helpful, there were a lot of activities that left a mark on my mind. I can even train other people on this.”

Partner Staff

- Using a power-building lens in our work: We avoid the idea of training mentors, instead we facilitate a process of supporting mentors to develop and recognise their own experience and skills to mentor girls. Before working with mentors on these development sessions, partners went through the process themselves before going on to witness mentors going through this experience. We believe this gave them insight into their own power and increased their understanding of what girls and young women in their communities go through and their resilience in the face of adversity.

“We always believe in training, manuals, passing on information – this was different. Mentors must be part of it, we must interact with them, there is a better way to pass information, let them be part of the process. At first, we had the idea of going to the training as a training of trainers and you use the manual you are given and you think you are the best person. Purposeful changed this thinking. It is to do with interacting, this methodology helped us a lot. All the training we got from Purposeful, those trainings and actions have been taken to our other project training, we call them development session.”

Partner Staff

“Going through the manual before doing the training, we put ourselves in the shoes of girls and mentors. In the reflections, we looked at our power. We weren’t conscious about it but we could be harmful in how we work. We think that we have the knowledge, we are the one bringing the knowledge and money, we are higher than them – this all has to do with power. This came out strongly.”

Partner Staff

- Mentors and girls stepping into their power: Many partner staff were first-hand witnesses to the journey mentors and girls were on in Girls’ Circles and saw them definitively step into their power and become more confident in their voice. As they took collective action, such as setting up businesses, partners realised that girls’ potential is limitless when equipped with the right tools.

“I have learnt that if girls are given the opportunity, they can do whatever they want, they can be able to make decisions on their own.”

Partner Staff

“Before this time, I didn’t know the challenges that girls were going through but when we focused exclusively on girls, I realised the challenges they face. It has changed my perception and view.”

Partner Staff

While budget cuts and COVID-19 stifled our ability to fully realise our accompaniment plans for these partners, by living our values through our way of being and way of working with mentors and girls we can also influence the adults we work with. As we continue to work with these partners, they share that these transformations are lasting, both from an individual and organisational perspective.

Part 3: What makes Girls' Circles Collectives work?

All three components of Girls' Circles Collectives are critical. Something alchemic happens when girls form bonds of solidarity, in relationship with mentors who are themselves politicised, in spaces they can call their own.

When we layer in a consciousness-raising curriculum, inspirational and informative characters and narratives, girls can start to imagine and then actualise new possibilities for themselves and their sisters. When these new visions are backed by tangible assets, especially money, something tectonic happens.

How Girls Circles Collective components come together to facilitate change

Girl-only spaces

Girl-only spaces provide girls with the physical space to be together and to explore feminist life skills topics.

- Girls feel safe and free to discuss issues and question norms in their community.
- Girls see the space as a respite or break from the pressure and stresses of their everyday lives.
- Girls come to the space to play and express joy through singing and dancing.
- Clubs that do not have a dedicated physical safe space highlight that it can create challenges for them and in some ways may compromise the autonomy and power of their groups.

Young women mentors

Young women mentors are the glue that holds everything together. For girls, they have become trusted allies, confidants, and role models.

- Mentors play a key role in translating the radio drama and talk show from Krio to the local language of the community.
- Mentors build up girls' confidence, and reinforce the positive messages and behaviours girls hear through the radio drama and talk show.
- Mentors play a central role in building and nourishing the bonds of solidarity among girls.
- Mentors create an atmosphere where girls can develop strong social networks and capital.
- Mentors provide emotional and financial support when girls face issues in their personal lives.
- Mentors negotiate and mediate difficult situations on behalf of girls and in some cases are the first port of call for safeguarding issues.

Girl-centred media

The majority of girls feel that Karo Kura Konection and Kompin may be the most influential aspect of Girls' Circles.

- Karo Kura Konection and Kompin is credible and relevant to girls' lives.
- Karo Kura Konection and Kompin and products provide girls with the knowledge base to question, while at the same time providing insight into an alternate reality and choices.

- Leveraging the artform of storytelling, girls hear stories from their everyday lives but the messages of voice, choice and power are radically different from the choices they see for themselves.
- Shifts in individual knowledge, self-confidence and opinions as a result of Karo Kura Konection and Kompin are instrumental to girls stepping into their power, exercising their rights and voice, and taking action.
- Delivers complex behaviour change messaging, which may otherwise be the responsibility of mentors to deliver to girls.

Additional contributing factors

Adult allies play a crucial role as change agents in further enabling girls' transformation – especially when they are faced with a crisis that requires them to resist or push back against social norms. Girls' Circles intentionally create a social network, which includes trusted adults such as partner staff and trusted older women volunteers that girls or their mentors can lean on.

Access to financial resources is essential. Mentors' stipends and the refreshment budget have been a springboard for collectivising and organising – including joint business ventures. Small businesses give girls a sense of self-worth and this power, coupled with an income, enables girls to identify and reject transactional sex and unwanted advances from men, including their own husbands, and challenge how their communities perceive them. Ultimately, it gives girls choices and options.

Building on our grantmaking practices as an organisation, at the time of writing, we are in the midst of the learning phase of a micro-grant initiative to the girls and mentors in Girls' Circles Collectives. In February 2022, we distributed 21 grants to

collectives of girls and mentors around Sierra Leone, reaching 39 mentors and 850 girls. We will scale this up later in 2022, with ambition to make another 100 grants.

In conclusion: A power-building lens differentiates this work from other similar programmes for girls

This work moves beyond traditional girls' programming, in which girls are treated as recipients of information, who need protection from the world. Feminist power-building theory and practice is the unifying factor and political North Star across all of this work. At its core, this initiative understands girls as living at the apex of power and vulnerability. We understand that girls are profoundly impacted by systems of domination and exploitation, and that girls are building strategies of survival and of resistance every day that have the potential to transform the world. This belief has very concrete implications for how we do this work with girls, as adults and allies. It means:

1. Connecting girls with the feminist resources – the tools to analyse the conditions of their marginalisation
2. The spaces to connect with and build solidarity with other girls and mentors
3. The resources to put their strategies into action

Beyond a series of traditional programmatic components or 'toolkit' of scalable solutions, the centre of gravity of this work is key. When we start from a place of political analysis and root our practice in the political theory that analysis spawns, we start to imagine a world that looks radically different from the one we inhabit. A world of safety, dignity, and bodily autonomy for all girls. We see this world being modelled

every day by the girls who are leveraging the possibilities of this work towards their own visions of safety. Towards their own visions of dignity and a life of meaning.

And as a result of their proximity to a feminist political analysis of girls' work, the worldview of adult allies and partners is beginning to shift too – girls are no longer objects in need of protection, but protagonists with voices, visions and strategies for doing this work of change. And this in turn is creating knock-on effects in the broader ecosystem of development work in Sierra Leone, seeding new words, new ideas, and the potential for a different kind of practice.

NBI observed that the increments of shifts in girls' lives, from how they perceive themselves to their newfound social network, would often be fully realised when the girls were faced with a crisis. The actions they take as a result of crisis, whether through setting up businesses or resisting the norms they face, girls challenge communities to see them differently – this is not an abstract concept, it is happening before their eyes and is impossible to ignore. There is a sense that communities are beginning to see and therefore acknowledge girls' value. In some communities, girls are being invited into decision-making spaces for the first time and their voices are being heard. In these stories alone, acts of resistance resulted in the enactment of local by-laws, of convictions for perpetrators and of arranged marriages overturned.

This is a movement for justice, and girls are at the fore.

Appendix 1: Methodology

Nestbuilders International (NBI), a Sierra Leonean research organisation, was contracted by Purposeful to independently collect girls' voices. This report is the result of that work. Seeking to strike a balance in our voice and their independent voice, this report is co-written by Purposeful and NBI, with Purposeful layering in context and data to further affirm and build an understanding of why this work is transforming the girls and the communities it is reaching.

Using the Most Significant Change methodology to shift power through learning

Focused on amplifying the impact of Girls' Circles Collectives on the lives of girls, NBI tailored the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach to select and document HerStories. Grounded in participatory storytelling, NBI leveraged this approach to shift power and amplify the voices of the girls, mentors, and their communities. By focusing on girls' lived experiences, the data collection approach puts girls in a position to control what is captured and learned.

Key steps in this tailored MSC approach involved:

1. Story-sharing: In their girl-only spaces, girls shared their stories in focus group discussion (FGD) style conversations. They were asked a simple question: 'Since the start of the Girls' Circle, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place in your life or in your community?' Through this, girls voiced the changes they've experienced as a result of participating in Girls' Circles. 175 girls took part in this process of story-sharing across the six districts.

2. Story selection: Once all the girls in each group shared their story, participatory story selection was completed by the girls themselves. In each community, girls voted on the story they considered as the most significant story of change. Six stories in total, one per district, were selected by girls themselves. Five of the stories focus on one central girl, while the sixth story brings together the voices of three girls.
3. Digging deeper – once the story was selected, the research team worked with the relevant girl(s) to collect in-depth details about their change story. This included further interviews and additional interviews with other respondents identified by the girl herself, such as her mentor, the local chief and/or a family member. An additional 60 respondents were interviewed through this process.

Respondents	Sample size
Girls	175
Mentors	22
Partner staff	11
Community members (including family members)	27
Total	235

Staying true to feminist monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) principles, girls, mentors and partners were meaningfully engaged throughout the case study cycle in the following ways:

1. Pre-fieldwork: NBI researchers contacted all partners and at least one mentor per targeted community to discuss the learning questions, approach and the proposed MSC methodology. This provided an opportunity for the mentors and partner staff to inform and directly feed into the finalisation of the approach and

data collection instruments – shifting power to determine how the exercise will be carried out.

2. During fieldwork: The MSC approach is naturally aligned to feminist MEL principles and sought to shift power to and amplify the voices of girls. By focusing on their lived experiences, told in their voices through stories, the data collection approach puts the girls in a position to control what is captured and learned.
3. Post-fieldwork: The reflection call with partners and the participatory session with girls and mentors provided a valuable opportunity for the NBI research team and the girls and mentors themselves to work together collaboratively to make sense of the data that was collected and learning that transpired through the field visits. This also provided an opportunity for the mentors and girls to inform the final outputs – rather than be passive recipients of the findings, or indeed not informed of the findings at all, as is often the case.

As a collaborative, participatory approach, MSC proved to be a powerful method for capturing rich descriptions of the qualitative changes in the girls' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. This technique also allowed the research team to measure intangible effects of the project related to social change (e.g., power, confidence, etc.) and to collect data on impact rather than outputs. See [endnote 6](#).

NBI attribute several factors to this success:

- Storytelling is familiar to the girls. In Sierra Leone, storytelling is a pervasive and longstanding traditional way for making sense of the world. The girls have

been exposed to the practice of storytelling, not only through their homes and communities, but also through the Girls' Circle. Many of the girls mentioned that they often spend time in the girl-only space telling stories about their lives to their peers. This helped to frame the initial data collection exercise as something that was natural and easy for the girls to embrace. The use of storytelling also helped to keep the discussion based on what is concrete in the girls' lives – rather than what is abstract or linked to objective indicators.

- Conducting the MSC approach in the girl-only space built upon existing bonds of trust. Building trust is important with MSC. The storyteller needs to feel safe to share their story, and the story collector needs to value the story being told. Having the mentor and all the girls present in their own girl-only space, provided a sense of familiarity and trust to the process. This was evident in how easily the girls were willing to share their story with the all-female data collection team. The collection of change stories was done in an atmosphere of established trust and solidarity among the girls. They were comfortable and open to sharing intimate details of their lives, because this is what they had been doing for the last year among the same girls in the same space. In this way, the data collection didn't feel forced, rather it was facilitated organically with and by the girls.
- The impact of the Girls' Circle on the girls' confidence, teamwork and desire to be included in decision making goes hand in hand with the MSC technique. Findings from the case studies demonstrate that the Girls' Circle has greatly increased the confidence of the girls, their ability to work together and their desire to be included in decision making. These were all important ingredients in the successful implementation of MSC with adolescent girls. Storytellers felt

confident to share their story, the girls needed to work as a team and be meaningful engaged to decide on which change story is most significant.

While we are highlighting eight specific girls' stories in this report, the insights shared are gathered from 175 girls, a short photo voice session with a cohort of girls and interviews with the people who feature in girls' stories. By providing girls with a platform to amplify their own voices, they rewarded us with rich details about the impact of the Girls' Circles Collectives on their lives.

Layering in additional insights and data sources

For over two years, Purposeful and partners have been working with girls and mentors to understand their stories of change, learning and challenges. At different junctures throughout this report, we provide additional findings and data from across a range of data sources. These include:

- Girls' Circles Collectives Baseline Study: The State of Out-of-School Girls report⁷. – a survey conducted with 2,239 girls from Girls' Circles Collectives in October 2020.
- Mentors' quarterly reflections: Submitted by mentors via KoboCollect⁸. on a quarterly basis, providing mentors with the opportunity to share stories and reflections.
- Girls' Survey (October 2021): Largely mirroring the baseline survey, this was a small scale survey conducted with 100 girls who were also interviewed as part of the baseline study.

- Partner reflections, check-ins and interviews: In June 2021, we held in-depth reflections with partners on their experience working on Girls' Circles Collectives and working with Purposeful. This is further complemented by monthly check-ins with partners and interviews focused on their transformation (February 2022).
- U-Report Poll: Housed by UNICEF Sierra Leone, U-report is a free SMS tool, designed for community engagement. SMS polls and alerts are sent out to a group of people signed up as U-Reporters. We conducted a poll in August 2020 and again in December 2021 to understand the wider reach and impact of Karo Kura Konection and Kompin.
- Team reflections, debriefs and support and learning visits – as a team, we frequently reflect on what we hear and feel about this work. When we visit communities, we speak with girls, mentors, and adults.

Appendix 2: Girls' Circles Collectives

Girls' Circles Collectives has grown out of many years of dreaming, planning and making with girls and their allies. Purposeful has been working in coalition with girls activists and older women allies since its inception six years ago during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone. In late 2019, with a consortium of local partners, Purposeful was granted funding from UK Aid under their Support to Adolescent Girls Empowerment in Sierra Leone (SAGE-SL) portfolio of work. This kickstarted our Girls' Circles Collectives work in earnest – the two years that followed were characterised with crisis and change but ultimately optimism for the change this work prevailed and delivered in dividends.

As COVID-19 spread across the world, the UK's overseas development assistance landscape shifted, resulting in the scaling back of budget commitments in 2020. We reflected on our plans and adjusted, while centring decision-making on girls. In 2021, while the COVID-19 pandemic was still ongoing and the Department for International Development (DFID) and Foreign & Commonwealth Office merged to become the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), the budget was revised down for a second time and FCDO ultimately withdrew all funding from February 2022.

As a movement-building hub of and for girls – rather than a traditional implementing partner, we have always been clear that our commitment to Sierra Leone's girls transcends the shifting currents of the development industry. As the reality of UK Foreign Policy shifts became apparent, we doubled down on our commitment, using core organisational financing to sustain the initiative while we mobilised additional

resources, including from individual philanthropists, private foundations and bi-lateral agencies including Irish Aid.

Though deeply challenging, these shifts have given us an opportunity to recommit to the radical roots of this initiative, to foreground our feminist values as we partner with girls and community based organisations, and to integrate some of the more liberatory practices we hold in other portfolios and initiative areas into Girls' Circles Collectives.

The Initiative in a nutshell:

Girls' Circles 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 feminist life skills curriculum
2. Young women mentors
3. Girl-centred media

Purposeful has been making experimental grants to girl-led collectives and young activists in Sierra Leone for five years. Based on these learnings and with additional resources secured, we introduced a new offering to girls in Girls' Circles in 2022, formally rebranding the initiative as Girls' Circles Collectives.

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.

Girl-only spaces

Female-only spaces are not a concept borne out of empowerment programming for girls and women, they have existed for millennia, as spaces of female liberation, connection and solidarity. Co-opted by development actors as a means of transferring information to girls, it would be easy to think of them in this singular sense – through Girls' Circles Collectives, we have sought to reclaim their value and restore their feminist significance.

In the communities in which we work, girls do not have autonomy over their own time and do not have access to spaces where they can connect with other girls. For girls who are not in school, this reality is even more extreme. Overcoming this was critical to the ambitions of this work – girls need to be together, to play, to sing, to dance, to be. This is critical to building trust and solidarity with each other as a precursor to transformational action. With the support of partners, leading community conversations, spaces for girls were identified and refurbished and in some cases, they were constructed from scratch.

From the girls' stories that follow and our own conversations and data sources, when girls talk about the spaces, they talk about joy, forgetting their worries and feeling less stressed – there is an improved sense of wellbeing, confidence and hope among girls. While the language of wellness and mental health is not yet lingua franca, it is there – in the October 2021 survey, nine out of ten girls said that they are happier now, than before they joined Girls' Circles. Girls are finding refuge in the space, hope, laughter, and joy – where they can be together, be themselves and step into an alternative narrative, one they're writing for themselves. This is a profound outcome.

“I now have courage that my life isn't over. Now I mingle with other girls, and we laugh and have so much fun. At first, I was just by myself.”

Girl (age 19), Bombali

A core component of the safe space is an adapted life-skills curricula that is grounded in feminist pedagogy and which centres on an exploration of the nature of power in girls' lives, supports girls to ask why things are the way they are and imagine how they might be made different. For a deeper dive into our politicised approach to working with girls through a power building frame, see [this report](#).

Young women mentors

A network of young women mentors is supported through a collective journey of feminist consciousness-raising to learn and unlearn and to connect with each other to become an even stronger movement across Sierra Leone. They use their

consciousness- and movement-building skills to guide girls through their own feminist journeys.

Each mentor supports a “club” of between 15 and 30 girls, aged between 10 and 15 or 16 and 19. They are near peers of the girls and were selected by the girls themselves. We put information assets, such as a smartphone (read more on the next page), in their hands, as well as financial resources in the form of a monthly stipend of 500,000 SLL (approximately £34 GBP). This act alone was viewed as radical by local partners and community power holders, but it sent a clear message, that mentors are trusted allies to girls and need tools and payment to carry out their role with meaning and intentionality. Over the course of two weeks in early 2021, Purposeful and partner met with over 600 mentors to strengthen their connection with each other, develop their consciousness and build their skills to mentor girls.

Over the last two years, we have seen, heard and felt how their lives have transformed as a result of this work and because they have access to resources. Since becoming a mentor, almost one in three (31%) have taken government exams, one in ten has enrolled in Senior Secondary School, meanwhile 9% have enrolled in vocational training and 6% have enrolled in university,

“Since I became a mentor, I believe in myself. I resat the WASSCE and have applied to Njala University to study chemistry and am waiting for the acceptance letter.”

Mentor, Western Area Rural

“I really feel good as a mentor because I went back to education through a vocational centre.”

Mentor, Bombali

Meanwhile, many mentors have leveraged their stipend to increase their livelihood further. Almost two in three (64%) mentors have started a business, while almost one in four (23%) have started savings. 35% of mentors are doing business or savings with the girls in their clubs.

“Since I became a mentor, I started up a business and saved. I never had a [bank] account but through this now I have been so excited about that.”

Mentor, Bombali

“As a club we have embarked on a business by making a cassava garden and planting groundnut. By doing so, we help to support each other and we work together.”

Mentor, Moyamba

The impact in mentors' lives extends beyond the tangible to their own skills, confidence and power, enabling them to speak with and support the girls in their clubs, in some cases negotiating to protect girls. As mentors grow into their confidence and power, they are becoming powerful advocates for girls and other young women in their communities.

“My biggest successes for the past three months as mentor, I [was] able to resolve a case for one of my girls that her parents were about to give her for married at the age of 16 years but due to my intervention the girl didn't go to the married.”

Mentor, Bonthe

“As a mentor, my biggest success is that pregnant women are now attending the clinic in larger numbers than before. And also, adolescent girls are now taking the family planning methods in the communities.”

Mentor, Bonthe

Smartphones as a tool of resistance

Putting smartphones in the hands of young women mentors has been pivotal to this work, especially during a time of emergency – one characterised by lockdowns and restrictions on movements. During this time we were able to connect with a network of over 600 mentors and, in turn, over 15,000 girls. Via WhatsApp, we sent guidance and key messages to them on how to be a mentor, how to support girls and on safeguarding. Via WhatsApp, they developed bonds with each other – sharing moments of joy and providing advice in challenging times.

“As for me, this phone is helping me greatly. It helps me to know about the world and the country I am living in. I talk with my colleague mentors about their community and it helps me to collect information about the Karo Kura radio show and also to pass on information about me and my girls in my community.”

Mentor (age 21), Western Area Rural

“It helps me to get good information about how to advise my girls and also how to safeguard them from abuse and harassment.”

Mentor (age 20), Bonthe

Via KoboCollect, we have been able to collect rich insight from mentors about their experience as mentors and how girls are engaging (or not) with Girls’ Circles Collectives. Their voices have enabled us to adapt throughout implementation, especially during the early stages of delivery, when COVID restrictions were at their highest.

“The smartphone helps me a lot because I am submitting my reports without paying for transport and it makes work so easy for me to get and give information very fast.”

Mentor (age 26), Falaba

This asset is more than a tool of programme-delivery, it sends a message to the community that these young women mentors are trusted, are valued and are respected by the organisations they are working with.

“It makes the people believe my advice because now they see me with this phone and they know I do not buy it for myself.”

Mentor (age 21), Karene

Smartphones continue to be our key way of being in dialogue with mentors and girls across Sierra Leone.

Girl-centred media

The history of Karo Kura Konection and Kompin

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

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 their circles even as the country was shutting down. Today, Karo Kura Konection and Kompin is aired across the country twice a week on around 38 local and national radio stations and sent directly to our network of over 600 mentors around Sierra Leone.

This girl-centred media approach, Karo Kura Konection and Kompin, is a series of related, reinforcing products:

- **Drama (Kompin):** The drama is grounded in the research and draws on the MARCH (Modeling 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. As it evolves, it is continuously informed by our work with girls, communities, local activists and grassroots organisations.

- Talk show (Konection): A blend of inspiration and information, the talk show bookends the drama, reiterating and debating key messages, while also introducing more information to the listener, such as discussions about the laws that exist in Sierra Leone to protect girls from violence. The talk show is hosted by two of our own team members, Josephine Kamara and Nyangah Wright-Rogers, who in their own right have become role models to girls and mentors around Sierra Leone.
- Music: Music plays an important role in the brand identity and forms a significant part of the radio content. It delivers information and inspiration while being fun, engaging and memorable. Again, as this work evolves, we're continuously informed by the girls around us, their own words and music form part of the brand. This aspect of the brand is augmented through the provision of drums to girl-only spaces and the infusion of music every time we come together with girls and their mentors.
- Discussion guides: Guides are tailored to each radio drama and talk show, enabling mentors to unpack the stories and messages through a series of activities and thought-provoking discussions, thereby facilitating girls' (and often their own) journey of analysis and consciousness-raising. Life skills guides are accompanied by audio messages to layer and further support the awakening and strengthening of skills.

The parts work together to reframe the way girls see themselves, and how their families, communities and the country sees them.

The now

Fast forward to early 2022, we have recorded and aired three series and 43 episodes. Series 1 focused on COVID and the many vulnerabilities girls face when living in emergencies, with even more limitations imposed on their lives. The theme of friendship and solidarity ran throughout.

Series 2 built further on Series 1, exploring issues of transactional sex, violence, and pregnancy, while also offering up messages of collective action, how girls can work together to generate an income and how they can support each in times of need.

Series 3, entitled My Body, My Choice, was aired from February 2022. Series 4 will focus on FGM, developed in close consultation with Sierra Leonean activists and grassroots organisations leading the movement against the practice.

Meet the Cast

- Lucy: A leader, an advocate, a big sister and a mentor. She supports and motivates girls to embark on collective work. She ensures girls are safe in her community and they access the services they need.
- Mariatu: A friend of Lucy. She is strong, smart and resilient, and is navigating being pregnant after being sexually abused by a local bike rider.

- Sia: A girl with a disability, resilient despite the challenges she faces and a central character in the Girls' Circle and friendship circle.
- Titi: The younger sister of Lucy, a schoolgirl who is always the first to suggest business ideas to her friends.
- Tunde: A big brother in the series and a champion of the Girls' Circle.
- Kadie: A 14-year old girl in an early marriage with an abusive husband.
- Nurse Zainab: A progressive, trusted ally and advocate for the girls in her community, Nurse Zainab is critical source of information around sexual and reproductive health, including maternal and child health, and contraception.
- Yeama: A member of the Girls' Circle, she is a female bike rider, challenging social norms, standing up to her family and inspiring girls in her community.
- Sama: Lucy's younger brother, he is a supporter of Girls' Circle and is always creating fun.
- Mama Foday: Lucy's first port of call for advice, she supports girls to navigate the issues they face in their Girls' Circle and the wider community.

Adult allies – partners and women volunteers

At this point of Girls' Circles Collectives, there are two investments in ensuring that mentors and allies have trusted adult allies in their lives – women volunteers (called Gender Empowerment Facilitators or GEFs) within existing community structures and local partners.

One GEF per community was selected by girls, with the support of local partners – they have emerged as a particularly powerful force for change. They facilitate ongoing relationships between community leaders and structures, serve as safeguarding focal persons and mediate challenges on behalf of girls and mentors with their families and other community powerholders. Due to budget cuts to the programme, since June 2021, they have not received a stipend for this work but many have continued to lean in – a reminder of the responsibilities women take on in their communities.

Five local partners are the face of Girls' Circles Collectives across the six districts. Local partners in the international development space frequently have their power compromised, funded by larger, often international organisations, who design the programmes, make the decisions and assign the budgets. With their own lived experience and knowledge usually overlooked, they are implementers, with little space for critical reflection or personal and organisational growth. We seek to intentionally support them on their own journey of unlearning and learning – knowing that this enables them to be stronger allies to girls (see [Part 2](#)).

District	Partner
Bombali	WOFHRAD
Bonthe	Pikin-to-Pikin Movement
Falaba	Daindemben Federation
Karene	Munafa M'Patie
Moyamba	Pikin-to-Pikin Movement
Western Area Rural	Community Action to Restore Lives (CARL)

In summary – The whole is greater than the sum

We believe and know that this combination of girl-only safe space, young women mentors and a girl-centred radio is catalysing change at different levels for girls – acknowledging their realities and enabling them to strategise for an alternative future.

The parts that follow further illuminate the change Girls' Circles Collectives is catalysing at individual, collective, community and structural levels.

Endnotes

Endnote 1

The State of Out-of-School Girls in Sierra Leone, October 2021:

<https://wearepurposeful.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/out-of-school-girls.pdf>

Endnote 2

KoBo Toolbox is a free, open-source platform for mobile data collection. Read more about how we use KoboCollect on our blog - The Importance of Girls' Voices During Emergencies... here's how we listened. <https://we-are-purposeful.medium.com/the-importance-of-girls-voices-during-emergencies-here-s-how-we-listened-dc5babf5ac91>

Endnote 3

Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo. 2021. Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/22: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. Washington, DC: GIWPS and PRIO

Endnote 4

Read more at WHO, Female genital mutilation and other harmful practices; Köbach, A., Ruf-Leuschner, M. & Elbert, T. Psychopathological sequelae of female genital mutilation and their neuroendocrinological associations. BMC Psychiatry 18, 187 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-018-1757-0>; Behrendt A, Moritz S. Posttraumatic stress disorder and memory problems after female genital mutilation.

Am J Psychiatry. 2005 May;162(5):1000-2. doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.162.5.1000. PMID: 15863806.

Endnote 5

Read more about how Purposeful and partners are working against the practice of FGM here, Wati Kura: A Break Through Moment in Anti-FGM Activism

Endnote 6

See Oxfam (July 2017). "Oxfam Discussion Paper: Applying feminist principles to program monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning". Available at:

<https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620318/dp-feminist-principles-meal-260717en.pdf;jsessionid=658275318D983FA51D568D9BF9ECA115?sequence=4>

Endnote 7

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[dc5babf5ac91](https://we-are-purposeful.medium.com/the-importance-of-girls-voices-during-emergencies-here-s-how-we-listened-dc5babf5ac91)

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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.

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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