

# Our Learning Agenda

## Reclaiming and organising our many ways of knowing

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## Introduction

Purposeful's Learning Agenda communicates our organisational learning approach and intentions to the world. It holds us accountable to our partners, allies, and ultimately, to the girls and young feminists we work with and for. In this space, we share the principles and questions guiding our learning and offer insight into how we seek to answer and share these answers.

*“Where there is power, there is resistance, so too, our work shows us that wherever there is resistance, there are girls. But because there is no coherent field or theorem that centres girls’ power, girls find themselves at the mercy of overlapping and often competing perspectives and approaches – including child protection, violence against children, youth work, women’s rights, violence against women, humanitarian aid, and development... at best, girls are being supported through formal institution using tools that were never really designed for girls or with girls. At worst, they are falling through the cracks entirely.”*

Read more in our [Building Girls’ Power report, 2022](#).

At Purposeful, we believe this is also true of the research and learning space, resulting in a dearth of evidence, literature, and stories about what it means to be a girl in the contexts we work in – how they experience the interventions and intentions designed to support them and how they, themselves, are solving their situations and agitating for change in their own lives every day.

## **Girls are either misrepresented, underrepresented, or simply not represented.**

To do this work, we must acknowledge the time and investment it takes to reach girls, especially those on the margins and sitting at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, to build relationships, to truly address power imbalances and to listen deeply.

By acknowledging this, we start with the intention of creating knowledge that truly centres girls, and from here, we can start to contribute to and build a knowledge base about politicised girls' work and why it works. As an organisation, this is how we try to show up in our learning work. We evolve and do better as we do so.

## **Definitions**

Language matters and evolves. Please review these definitions before diving into our Learning Agenda.

- *Girls and women:* Anyone who identifies as a girl and/or woman, including cis and trans girls and women in all their diversity.
- *Non-binary young people:* When we say non-binary we include all those that identify outside of the gender binary, neither a man, nor a woman, both/and.
- *Collectives:* Girls and young feminists organise in multiple ways. Some choose to register and operate as non-profit organisations while others choose not to or cannot register. We refer to the latter as Collectives.
- *Girl-led work:* Girls make the decisions on all issues relating to their Collective or organisation. They design their own plans and strategies, they set their own priorities and agendas and they decide how resources are spent. They may or

may not have the support of adults. Adult allies might also provide information and assist girls during their processes.

- *Girl-centred work*: An organisation's mission, vision and goals focuses on girls. An organisation's programming is shaped by adolescent girls' contexts, needs, and perspectives.
- *Adult ally*: Adults who contribute to ending girls' oppression and/or supporting girls' resistance and activism. The adults may or may not self-identify as allies to girls but through their actions they demonstrate allyship.
- *Power holder*: Any person and/or institution holding power over girls, intentionally or unintentionally. This ranges from siblings, parents, teachers and elders in a community to members of parliament and presidents of countries. It includes people who make funding decisions and those who choose how to spend funding when it is granted. It includes us.
- *Accompaniment*: Any structure put in place to support girls, mentors, young people and/or partners. This includes, but is not limited to, the different aspects of Girls' Circles Collectives, such as young women mentors, girl-only spaces and girl-centred story telling; activist-led accompaniment with grantee partners, i.e. Coaching Circles, collective care spaces, and festivals, storytelling workshops and learning spaces around topics such as digital security and resource mobilisation; and safeguarding training with partners.
- *Learning*: The spectrum of our learning and research work. It ranges from formal and informal documentation of team's insights, such as partner reports and WhatsApp messages, research/insights generated by girls, to activities led by our internal learning team or external consultants. In more traditional development spaces, this could also be seen as including monitoring and

evaluation, however we recognise the roots of these practices as ‘the master’s tools’ and we intentionally seek to unlearn these practices and lean into the learning aspect of our work. As our core purpose is to collect and generate meaningful insights and learning, we refer to the team leading this work as the Learning and Insights team.

## **Our approach**

One of our six strategic goals is to document herstories, curate conversations and convene learning space that spotlights the power of girls’ organising and activism. The Learning Agenda unpacks our commitment to that goal – the questions we want to answer, the methodologies we draw on, and the principles around how we will do so over the next five years. Building on our existing learning practices and work, this lays out the culmination of a year of collective contemplation and vision with our team, young activist and consultant advisers across multiple continents, to contribute to a body of knowledge that will influence and shift the field around politicised girls’ work.

To do this, we draw on robust and rigorous research methodologies, whilst adapting and tailoring to ensure we are doing so in a way that challenges and overcomes the inherent power-laden nature that is too often perpetuated through western approaches to knowledge generation.

Patriarchal, imperialist, and colonial forces have long attempted to delegitimise indigenous epistemologies and elevate western modes of thinking, knowing and therefore being. In this context, the invisibilisation, dehistoricisation, and

depoliticisation of feminist movements and acts of resistance have long been used as strategies that stifle struggles for justice and liberation. These strategies have worked to erase girls from the history of social change and to disconnect them from a deep well of knowing that would be such a powerful force in their work for freedom and justice.

Documenting and sharing our work, and that of the movements we support, is a profound act of resistance in the face of systems that have never wanted feminist movements to know or to claim our knowledge.

Read our Strategic Framework [on this Purposeful page](#).

## **Supporting our Theory of Change**

We believe that when we support girls, young feminists, and their allies in movements and collectives with the resources, networks, and platforms they need to power their activism, we begin to see cultural conversations shifting, harmful practices eroding, power balancing and systems of oppression cracking. ***These changes are necessary so that girls live in safety, dignity, and freedom. And through it all, the world is transformed.***

We know that to realise this vision, a strong movement with and for girls is essential. We know that change is not linear and that it takes time – a positive shift today, can be reversed tomorrow, so our approach to learning does not only focus on what has changed, but explores challenges, backlash and the many ways in which

movements are holding the line. This approach helps us to interrogate and build upon the theoretical grounding which informs and inspires our work.

***The learning and insights we capture play a critical role in strengthening not just our work, but the journey of building and sustaining the movements we support and all those working towards the liberation of girls.***

Read our Theory of Change Narrative [in this Purposeful PDF](#).

### **A power-building approach: our values and feminist learning principles**

Learning, as with all Purposeful's work, is rooted in a power-building approach. We are guided by the growing principles and practices around feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL), centring on the acknowledgement that gender inequities lead to social justice, and that race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, ability, age, and other factors work together to deepen exclusion and harm even further.

Our learning work is not simply a tool to document the journey towards girls living in dignity, safety, and freedom but a critical part of the journey itself. Our learning approach is designed to centre and build girls' power, and in doing so, we believe will produce knowledge and insights that will contribute to the transformation of girls' lives.

***As an Africa rooted organisation, we specifically draw on African feminist thought, as well as indigenous research principles and methodologies.***

These principles include:

### **1: Recognising that Learning is a Political Activity**

It is critical to challenge our role as an objective, neutral “expert”. We must recognise the attitudes, values, assumptions, characteristics, and power that we bring to our learning processes. We strive to be a facilitator, co-creator, co-learner, and ally who builds knowledge that contributes towards girls living in safety, dignity, and freedom. Our work is political and we are not learning from a neutral position. We understand that knowledge is a powerful and political asset. Our research and evaluations can inform funding decisions, influence narratives, and help shape movement strategies

Building counter narratives: A critical part of our work is to challenge negative dominant narratives about girls and girlhood. Girls are not just ‘beneficiaries’, they are actively working towards their own liberation. Girls are producers of knowledge and the experts of their own realities.

### **2: Valuing Girls as Experts and Knowledge Holders**

Feminist MEL prioritises qualitative data and participatory methods and raising girls’ voices is an overarching guiding principle of all our work. We are deeply committed to honouring all girls as experts who hold and produce knowledge and this extends to supporting processes where girls can produce knowledge and make sense of what data means to them, including the allocation of financial resources for girls to lead their own research and documentation.



Too often, particular ways of knowing are given hierarchy and privilege over others, and we strive to create space for multiple ways of knowing. We aim to be non-extractive in our learning, whether with girls, community members or partners and allies and we intentionally share back what we have learned with the people we are learning from. We will continue to resource our work in this way.

Purposeful is launching a research initiative that supports girls with grants and accompaniment to conduct their own research on issues critical to them – in their own context and from their own frame of reference.

### **3: Shifting Power to Girls**

Girls input into our learning processes – both supported to conduct their own research and documentation, and as an integral part of the design and implementation of that research. We recognise knowledge as a powerful resource, and as we shift power to girls, we aim to remove barriers for girls' meaningful engagement with research processes, data, and findings. We want the knowledge and learning from our work, including its language and format, to be accessible to everyone we work with.

### **4: Honouring All Girls, Everywhere**

Girls often face overlapping and compounding forms of discrimination and oppression, and the intersectionality of this is complex. We strive to remove barriers to participation to ensure all girls' voices are amplified. We are intentional about diversity and inclusion in our learning work and adopt an intersectional feminist lens to how we move through all stages of our learning.

We know that it is important to ensure that knowledge production and sharing is inclusive for persons with a disability. During 2022–23, through partnerships with disability rights organisations and consultations with grantee partners focused on disability rights, we are continuing to strengthen this area of our work.

We remove the burden of reporting from girls, particularly in our grant-making work. Reporting is voluntary, with options to share the work via WhatsApp voice-notes, learning calls online, or written reports.

### **5: Many Ways of Knowing**

The existing global hierarchy of knowledge is a social construct which silences and side-lines the voices and power of feminist work. We embrace that knowledge is shared well beyond the written word, and stories in their many forms, images and music are all valid forms of generating and documenting.

We are currently piloting a multimedia project in Kenya and Sierra Leone that is supporting girls to document and share their stories using film and visual storytelling.

### **6: Language Matters**

Our work around the world is invariably in English and we recognise that colonialism has resulted in English being the common language across our team, partners, and allies. We sit with the tension that to do our work at scale, to communicate about it, and indeed, to communicate with each other, we lean on English.

continuing to strengthen this area of our work.

To bring some balance to this, we will offer translation to other languages, where possible. When working directly with girls, we will speak their local languages. Critically, when translating or quoting their voices and writing, we will limit edits to their spelling, grammar, punctuation, and phraseology. Where possible, we share quotes for review and approval, and share findings in shorter and simpler texts, through videos and in local languages. In Sierra Leone this works well, as we have physical presence, but with grantee partners across the world, translation is a challenge, and we will continuously explore language justice across all the work we do.

When we translate stories and voices from indigenous languages, what are we losing?

## **7: Resourcing Learning**

Purposeful has committed to resourcing its learning work sufficiently in its allocation of people and money, so that we can collect, analyse, and share in ways that are aligned to our values. We acknowledge this and aim to be transparent. We have been able to develop a feminist approach to learning specifically due to flexible and core funding that has enabled us to dream and implement freely. With more restrictive donors, we work within their frameworks, but design processes aligned to our values and principles as much as possible.

## **8: Acting on our Learning**

As feminists, it is both ethical and moral to act on our learning. Our learning must contribute to our practice and programmes, our advocacy and influencing, our way of

understanding and being in the world. At the core of our learning is our desire to transform power relations. If we are not using and sharing our learning, we must ask ourselves why we are doing it and who it is serving.

Note: Some principles and practices around MEL are adapted from a presentation by Carol Miller for Prospera International Network of Women's Funds - Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Community of Practice sub-group on Feminist MEL and Making Feminist Evaluation Practical by Donna Podems, eVALYation Matters, Fourth Quarter, 2018

## **Purposeful values**

To build the world we imagine, a core set of values guides all that we do at

Purposeful:

- Many ways of knowing
- Centred living experience
- Taking bold action
- Deep embodiment
- Joy as resistance
- Rooted in sisterhood and solidarity
- Cultivating radical imagination
- Power in diversity

## **The learning questions we are exploring**

Through this year-long participatory process and informed by our work with girls and young feminists, we developed a set of learning questions to inform and guide our learning at Purposeful.

## **The storyline that informs our learning questions**

- **Girls are resisting:** Girls resist everywhere, with multiple strategies. And sometimes, intergenerationally with allies. Girls' resistance creates change in girls' lives and accelerates broader social change
- **We can resource resistance:** Funders can resource resistance. And girls need more than financial resources. Resourcing girls' resistance accelerates transformation.
- **We can organise power holders to act in solidarity with girls:** Power holders are critical agents of transformation to sustain systems level change for girls.
- **Girls have a role to play in transforming power structures:** Centering girls in policy and advocacy agendas transforms power structures to work better for girls, and therefore everyone. All girls can be meaningfully engaged across funding, policy and advocacy agendas.
- **When girls are resourced, connected and politicised, with geographic concentration, there is a tipping point... girls are living in safety, dignity and freedom!** Redistributing power assets, building collective power, organising power holders and transforming power structures are the four components to a healthy girls' movement and the realisation of Purposeful's vision.

- **And, Purposeful is set up in a way that can deliver this vision.**

Far from being static, we continue to ideate and iterate these questions for a story that is living and evolving. Some questions could be answered today, some will take significantly longer, and others will require collective effort and engagement from all those working towards girls living in dignity, freedom, and safety.

Read our learning questions [in this Google spreadsheet](#).

## **Insight into our how**

We draw on both traditional empirical and indigenous research methods and processes of knowledge generation, while leaning into our values and feminist learning principles – knowing that our learning spaces and knowledge creation will be richer as a result.

Our learning is grounded in African, feminist, decolonial and Black thinkers' work, such as Bagele Chilisa's 'Indigenous Research Methodology' and S.R. Toliver's 'Recovering Black Storytelling in Qualitative Research: Endarkened Storywork'.

We know that many organisations are also on this journey to strengthen their learning and align it to their values. Purposeful will be creating spaces to share with and learn from other organisations, this will include sharing more on our learning approach and the resources that inspire us.

## Data sources and data collection

In our commitment to removing the burden of reporting, we make all forms of reporting and participation in evaluations voluntary, offering multiple ways in which girls and women can share information about their collectives and initiatives.

To answer our learning questions, our day-to-day approach includes:

- **Learning calls:** Online calls designed to facilitate voluntary sharing by those we work with, including girls, young women activists, young people, partners, adult allies, and funders. Drawing on the principles of focus group discussion, spoken word and storytelling, these provide a platform for sharing across groups, while also providing an opportunity for documentation, sense making and insight generation.
- **Document review:** Across our grant cycles, applications in whatever form they are submitted, provide rich insight into the work and priorities of girls and young women activists around the world. Some grantees and partners submit written reports to us about their work – these can be supplemented or replaced by oral reports, guided by the grantee and partners' preference.
- **Support and learning visits:** Across our work, but especially in Sierra Leone, we visit the girls, young feminists, grantees, and the partners we support to see, hear and feel their resistance in action. Largely grounded in observation, these visits may be supplemented with interviews and/or focus group discussions. Music, dance, and storytelling are common features.
- **Team reflections:** Ranging from monthly to quarterly, teams across Purposeful carve out time to reflect on the lived experience of their work.

These facilitated calls provide space for reflection on successes, challenges, learning, adaptation, and moments of joy.

- **Mentors' reflections:** We're committed to hearing from the young women who support our work with girls as mentors in safe spaces. We do this through online/offline forms which they complete with phones given to each mentor and WhatsApp correspondence, as well as in-person reflections when opportunity permits.
- **WhatsApp chats and diaries:** This form of communication provides rich insight into our day-to-day work. While we have multiple groups across the organisation, we have a dedicated group set up to capture the work of our Advocacy team.
- **Analysis of grant information:** Through our grantmaking, we use Salesforce to analyse, aggregate and disaggregate quantitative data, for example, the types of collectives and organisations applying for grants, the numbers actually supported, the geographic distribution and thematic areas of work. This data provides a way to visiblise the work of girl and young women-led collectives and organisations around the world. We're committed to sharing this data publicly and updating regularly.

For deeper dives and understanding of our work, we layer in tailored learning approaches to the topic and context. This includes, but is not limited to:

- **Most Significant Change:** Grounded in participatory storytelling, we use this approach to shift power and to amplify the voices of girls and young feminists.



By focusing on lived experiences, the data collection approach puts girls and young feminists in the position to control what is captured and learned.

- **Outcome dreaming:** This participatory process, engages girls and young feminists to define their dreams of transformation as a result of their partnership with Purposeful – how their lives and their communities will change as a result of being part of a project or receiving a grant. These dreams will be revisited periodically or at the end of the project, and the same group will reflect on whether the dreams were realised and if there were gaps. Drawing on the principles of outcome harvesting, we are experimenting with outcome dreaming on a small scale and will scale it up to other areas of our work as we learn.
- **Outcome harvesting:** Working retrospectively, this approach allows us to collect stories and views about transformation as a result of a process, programme or project..
- **Youth-led participatory action research:** Shifting the power fully to girls and young feminists, this approach allows girls and young feminists to decide the issues they want to explore, how they want to explore them, and how they share their findings. Throughout this process, we support girls and young feminists with the skills and spaces they need to develop their research.
- **Quantitative Surveys:** We value both qualitative and quantitative data and rely on both to inform the work we do. If the questions we and girls seek to explore require quantitative data, we incorporate quantitative data collection and analysis.

For example, in October 2020, we conducted a knowledge, attitude and practice survey with 2,239 out-of-school adolescent girls in six districts across Sierra Leone. The landmark report shines a light on the realities of these girls, often statistically hidden by national averages and small sample sizes. We continue to use it as a powerful advocacy tool at national level. If we replicate a quantitative survey of this nature in the future, we will be more intentional about girls' participation in the design, data collection, and analysis process.

Read The State of Out-Of-School Girls In Sierra Leone on [this Purposeful PDF](#).

### **Analysis and sensemaking**

We believe that our learning methodologies embed both explicit and intuitive ways of analysing and sensemaking. Team reflections support members to think beyond the activity to the meaning and implications of what they see, feel, and hear through this work. Our learning calls and reporting templates aim to do the same, incorporating questions to facilitate critical analysis to move beyond activity reporting.

For some work, we draw on the traditional method of coding our data to enable us to organise our many ways of knowing against our Learning Questions. When using this process, we build in steps to ensure the team outside our Learning and Insights team are inputting into the analysis process. For deeper dives, we may also draw on other methods of analysis, such as discourse analysis.

Ideally, a process of analysis and sensemaking with girls and young feminists is part of any research process we engage, this may take place through in-person (inherent

in some of our methodologies, such as participatory action research) or virtual conversations (such as WhatsApp discussions and learning calls).

We are committed to using methodologies and methods that *“make visible voices of those who continue to suffer oppression and discrimination, be it because of their sex, [age], race/ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or social class.”* See Bagele, C. 2013. Indigenous Research Methodologies for more on this.

## **Sharing**

We are deeply committed to sharing back our learning with the girls, young feminists, and communities that it represents. How we do this will be tailored to the context and will leverage our existing platforms and communication channels as much as possible.

Beyond this, we will share our learning in ways that contribute to the growing evidence base of politicised girls’ work.

## **Our Learning Manifesto**

**Intentions for learning and unlearning collectively and individually, co-created by the Purposeful team.**

As a feminist organisation, rooted in Africa and working all around the world, we are committed to modelling the world we imagine, first within our own walls. We are learning together what this means in practice, approaching this task with care and humility, knowing that to undo the legacy of racist, colonial, and patriarchal

organisational practices is the work of lifetimes. Learning together enables us ***to be responsive, to strengthen our practice and use our learning for advocacy & awareness raising*** both internally and outside the organisation.

***As an organisation***, we are guided by a core set of values which inform our understanding and approach to learning, in particular, lifting up and acknowledging our values of centering on lived expertise and many ways of knowing. We know that the journey of learning is never-ending, requires a willingness to unlearn, is ever changing and an intensely personal process. In the same way that we believe that there are many ways of knowing, we know that there are many ways of learning. We are committed to resourcing and carving out the space and time to nurture a culture of learning together.

### **Our learning spaces will provide platforms to:**

- *Improve* our practice
- *Challenge and deepen* our knowledge and understanding of our work with and for girls
- *Reflect* on the voices of the girls, mentors, and partners we work with
- *Learn* from each other, from the local to the global, and the global to the local
- *Examine* our Theory Of Change and explore the impact of our values on our work
- *Co-create* insights and meaning from our work
- *Strengthen* our skills and tools to do this work
- *Create* tools for advocacy and fundraising
- *Hear* from others working with and for girls, on the Continent and beyond

- *Be curious* about our work and create space for play
- *Contribute* to our growth as human beings

Our learning spaces include, but are not limited to, internal monthly team reflections and bi-weekly Collaboration and Learning Sessions.

We will remain reflective and iterative around our learning spaces to ensure they respond as we thrive and grow. We will document and translate our learnings into accessible thought pieces, tools, and resources to share with our wider community and contribute to the body of evidence for work with and for girls.

As individuals, we are committed to recognising and sharing our own knowledge, experience, and skills. We will create a safe space of learning and unlearning together by showing up, being present and being open and honest with each other. As we traverse this journey of learning and unlearning, we will always stay curious and will keep asking questions, even the tough ones.

## **Next Steps**

Our Learning Agenda is intended to be both contributive and reflexive – it will change and grow as we do. We welcome comments and critique. We invite you to watch our spaces for sharing moments and to invite us into your spaces to share insights on what we're learning and how we are doing it.

Email us at [info@purposeful.org](mailto:info@purposeful.org).

## **Who we are**

We are Purposeful.

We are feminists, activists, artists, theorists, revolutionaries, organisers.

We dream, we imagine, we make, we gather, we co-create.

We agitate and shout and laugh and dance and sing and fight and win.

We are Purposeful.

In collaboration and consultation across our people, this Learning Agenda process was led by:

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