

Girl-Centred Media as a Tool for Transformation

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Introduction: Girl-Centred Media

Two young women are in animated discussion. Like sisters, they share confidences, worries, and questions, they debate, laugh and finish each other's sentences. They make music, they draw in the opinions of others, and then tune into a drama series they both love. These young women mentors, now seasoned national radio presenters, are in the studio anchoring a radio talkshow, and its accompanying drama that is, in many ways, the embodiment of Purposeful.

A storytelling world for the whole of Sierra Leone: Lifting up the power and possibility of girlhood

Since May 2020, the Purposeful talkshow, Karo Kura Konection, and drama series, Karo Kura Kompin, are broadcast twice each week on 38 local and national radio stations across Sierra Leone, along with being shared directly via smartphones to the Purposeful network of over 600 young women mentors and their Girl's Circle Collectives of 15,000 out-of-school adolescent girls. The broadcast focus, now in its fourth series, is deeply political, feminist, and unapologetically girl-centred, born out of crisis and delivered collectively with joy and creativity.

Sparked during Ebola, Karo Kura has become a political home for girls at moments of crisis and beyond

The stories and voices were created and prototyped as one of Purposeful's formative endeavours in the aftermath of the Ebola crisis in 2015. They are grounded in

extensive literature reviews, media diaries with girls and deep conversations held with communities, from girls and boys to elders, around Sierra Leone. Local media experts, historians, artists and activists were brought together to develop the vision and develop characters and content. These were then tested and ideated with communities.

“We are yearning for something authentic, something that talks to the culture I had as a child. We need to look into our own culture for the challenges we face – the answers are within.”

Government Advisor on Gender Issues, Freetown, 2016

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, aged 15–18, Moyamba, 2016

Drawing on the principles of the behavioural change approach of MARCH (Modelling and Reinforcement to Combat HIV), Karo Kura Konection and Kompin, are rooted in the realities of girls’ lives

Maximising serial drama entertainment and audience reach with an iterative contextual development process, Karo Kura is designed to have mass appeal with

audiences across the country, while staying true to girls' voices and visions for lives free from violence. The content is political and feminist by nature, but to affect incremental shifts in the negative narratives in which adolescent girls are centred, it is essential that it has wider cut-through with girls' families.

Grounded in the research of the Programmes and Learning & Insights teams, and grassroots partners for its drama development, the storylines follow five girl protagonists, the deepening of their friendships, and confidence together, their ability to collectivise and make money, along with their increasing understanding of issues in their lives like gender based violence, transactional sex, child marriage, sexual health and rights. Character development remains authentic to the daily reality so that community wide, listeners can see themselves reflected positively or find affinity with role models they can grow to mirror.

The result is a deeply relevant weekly talkshow, and with guest discussion inserts that draw in wider community debates and strategies, coupled with a compelling drama that is immersive and authentic, without judgement or tipping into being overtly educational or didactic, and a cast of characters who model new behaviours, challenge harmful narratives and raise the listeners' consciousness to the situation of girls, all the while offering up an alternative – a new narrative about girls.

The talkshow and drama are underpinned by weekly discussion guides, videos, and a feminist life-skills curriculum

Young women mentors use these tools to forge a learning pathway with girls that builds solidarity with each other, enables them to question their situation, explore bodily autonomy and choice against prevailing cultural conversations and expectations of girls, and to imagine and strategise for an alternative reality.

Unpacking the stories in the drama and the talkshow discussions, the discussion guides and life-skills sessions open up games and activities to deepen friendships and to share lived experiences. They prompt exploration of girls' realities and enable them to question the way things are. In a carefully scaffolded enquiry-led process, sessions explore the structures and systems around girls and help them develop their own power within.

Supporting videos focus on financial literacy, independence, and collective enterprise, all the time working to reframe the way girls see themselves, re-imagining and dreaming for their futures. Animations further support Girls' Circle Collectives across the country via WhatsApp, along with local language guides and posters as visual aids.

Girl-centred media is showing us that it can be a powerful force in influencing communities and in shifting views about girls and traditional practices. The effects seen in Sierra Leone include increased awareness of violence, increased knowledge of their sexual and reproductive health, increased livelihood, income generation activities and increased confidence. Furthermore, there is evidence of change among wider listeners, including adult men. Read more in [this plain text report](#) on the Purposeful website.

When girls are given the tools to spark their resistance, their actions challenge cultural conversations and expectations, increasing community support for girls' rights. 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.

The broadcasts draw on popular culture, music and entertainment to model and inspire

Original music plays a significant role in the Karo Kura identity and is informed by girls' words and their music styles. It's a further communication component threaded through the radio content, that blends information with engaging and memorable tunes lifting the joy of solidarity and sisterhood. For example, [this Karo Kura music video](#), 'Chance'. Weekly guests perform original poetry and songs and offer spotlight features for emerging artists.

Karo Kura Konection and Kompin: a series of related, reinforcing components

Karo Kura Konection

A weekly radio talkshow. Blending inspiration with information, the format bookends the drama series, exploring and debating the key messages with its two hosts and then going deeper with Kapu Sens, a weekly guest discussion insert that offers a valuable platform for intergenerational dialogue.

Karo Kura Kompin

A weekly 15-minute radio drama. Storylines see the girls build up the consciousness and confidence to question their situations and put in place strategies to resist. These include supporting each other, creating businesses, becoming financially independent and finding trusted adults they can reach out to in times of crisis.

Discussion Guides and Feminist Life Skills Curriculum

Weekly guides and session materials underpin and support mentors' facilitation of circles of girls in their girl only spaces. Discrete audio clips and drama excerpts go deeper into helping girls understand more about their bodies, and knowledge to help them access services.

The Alchemy in the Approach

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 with narratives grounded in real life stories, girls can start to imagine and then actualise new possibilities for themselves and their sisters.

While the process can sometimes feel like the “black box”, the **insight gathering in real time** is where Purposeful has found the real magic - we are always challenging our assumptions, listening to everyone involved in production, sense checking with girls and mentors to refine our story lines.

The process starts with a six-week research and character development phase followed by contextual mapping of the story arc and complex behavioural change messaging. Then follows extensive workshopping and testing between three Purposeful teams:

- Writers and series’ producer
- Feminist education specialists
- Programme team working directly with girls and mentors

Technical and health advisors are also drawn into the collaborative drama-development process. The more complex story arcs develop over multiple series - some that come to joyful outcomes for the girls and others that sit in the pain of violence or of losing a life. It’s in this complexity that the Purposeful team’s

proximity and immediacy with girls, mentors, technical advisors and grassroots organisations has played out to greatest impact in being able to approach the fragility of child marriage and sexual and physical violence, without turning listeners away, as all ages can identify with storylines and the experience of the characters, either personally or through someone they know in their community. Throughout the development process, mentors' and girls' feedback in real time can change a storyline right to the point of rehearsals and recording.

Similarly, the recording studio is a safe space for the cast of actors to question, adapt, and challenge context and language to ensure precision, authenticity, and cultural sensitivity. It is never too late to make a change.

Getting practical: real time adaptations

From the very first series, we have worked closely with our learning and insights colleagues to get real time feedback from mentors and girls. This has led to critical and practical adaptations to maximise girls' ability to listen. They include:

- **Local languages:** While the show is aired in Krio, the most widely spoken local language, we quickly realised that some mentors were translating in other local languages so the girls could keep up completely. To support them, we introduced episode summaries in an additional three languages - Fullah, Mende and Temne.
- **WhatsApp:** Despite extensive radio airing, girls were not always able to meet on time to tune in, to address this, we began compressing the show

and sending directly to mentors' phones via WhatsApp, giving girls full autonomy over when to meet.

- **Mentors' videos:** Working at scale has seen the success of sharing additional videos to support mentors' from safeguarding, facilitating sessions, and getting the best from their phones, to financial literacy, and inspiration for collective enterprise.
- **Bluetooth speakers:** Mentors told us that phones were not loud enough for all the girls in their group to hear well, bluetooth speakers were procured and distributed to meet this challenge.
- **Slowing down:** Mentors shared that sometimes the characters speak too quickly or talk about concepts which they girls don't understand. We became even more intentional about our explanations and slowing down the pace.
- **Repeats:** To ensure that girls have a chance to listen and absorb the show, we repeat the series before moving on. This is especially important during the wet season, farming times and holidays, when girls struggle to meet as consistently.

We give ourselves **permission to pause, reflect and change** our plans based on what we're hearing from girls, mentors, partners and local activists and experts. For example, for a complex issue like F.G.M., we know that this must be introduced carefully, at the right time and with the right support around girls and mentors. While we had planned a deep storyline around this in 2022, we've pushed this to late 2023 to give time and space to further build up girls' voice and power.

Meet the Cast

Capturing girls' imaginations, 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.

- **Lucy:** a big sister and a mentor, she is a role model among her friends. She supports and motivates her group of five out-of-school friends to work as a collective.
- **Mariatu:** an adolescent girl who becomes pregnant because she is coerced into transactional sex in order to provide for her family. Smart and resilient, she is navigating her pregnancy with her friends and planning for early motherhood.
- **Sia:** a girl with a disability who, despite the challenges she faces, is a central figure in the Girls' Circle Collective, their friendship and enterprising plans.
- **Titi:** the youngest member of the group, she is always the first to come up with ideas and takes a business enterprise through to successful results.
- **Kadie:** a married adolescent girl whose husband is sexually violent. She finds safety in the group and is navigating her way out of the relationship.

Wider friends and community members are woven into the drama, such as Yaema and Idris, a young couple in a relationship that is developing as equals. She, a bike rider running her own business and he a student, both dreaming about their future together. There are trusted adult allies in the world of the girls, including Nurse Zainab, a central character offering support and knowledge, and Ma and Pa Foday who are champions of the Girls' Circle Collective and who parent their son and

daughter equally. Surrounding the girls are characters who uphold the pervasive social norms, with a raft of negative encounters, risks, jeopardy and high-stakes drama.

At A Glance: Series 1-4

2020-2023, 59 episodes.

Series 1 - Keeping Girls Safe During a Global Pandemic

A focus on the many vulnerabilities girls face when living in emergencies, along with keeping safe during COVID-19. Over 10 episodes, we see the coming together of the five girl protagonists and are drawn into their individual challenges, their growing friendship and solidarity. Storylines introduce gender inequality and the effects of power and power-holders on girls, excluded from services or without a voice in their community.

Series 2 - Me, Myself, and My Community

The girls grow in their shared confidence and set up a Girls' Circle - we get to know key adult characters like Nurse Zainab who will become their confidante and will play a central role in the dilemmas and challenges as the drama unfolds, and Ma and Pa Foday who offer an alternative narrative to the norms they experience. This series focuses on the make-up of their community, the power structures that surround the girls, and how in developing their confidence, they experience their own power - the power within. Storylines spotlight transactional sex, violence and teenage pregnancy,

early marriage, disability and inclusion, while offering continued hope through healthy relationships, and how girls can work together to generate income and take collective action.

Series 3 - My Body, My Choice

A high-stakes 11-part series with plotlines that go deeper into harsh realities of the girls' lives. Storylines follow a teenage pregnancy through transactional sex, sexual violence, managing a period for the first time and understanding menstruation, through to STI's and sexual health. It's a series of family drama, a violent husband, and a near maternal death, set against the joys of an upcoming wedding between a young couple in love, excitement about a new and flourishing business and the deep friendship now formed in the Girls' Circle that celebrates girls, their bodies and how they are developing into confident young women together. These girls know their value and are not afraid to ask the questions and push back against what they think is wrong.

Series 4 - Reflection and Debate

Well established as a group now, the girls - one of them now a mother - encounter new challenges and take firmer ground themselves. Storylines focus on sexual health and dispelling the myths of the condition, obstetric fistula, often one of the consequences of female genital mutilation (F.G.M.).

The Girls' Circle Collective is making profit as a business, and their financial independence is growing. The drama unearths communication skills, being open-

mindful and appreciating difference, dealing with conflicts, difficult conversations and debate. It focuses on the trusted adults the girls need to keep around them, and throughout the challenges, there is continued focus on the healthy relationship of Yaema and Idris, the young love interests, and the joy found in girls' friendship and their solidarity.

Storylines Inspiring Change: How Karo Kura is shifting cultural conversations at scale

The power of Karo Kura Konection and Kompin lies in its ability to simultaneously raise consciousness and subtly build the listeners' interpersonal skills, such as critical thinking, decision-making and communication, all while offering up a new narrative about adolescent girls. For this to work, the audience must recognise their own lives and selves 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 a survey of 100 girls (conducted in October 2021), 97% said that they believe the information they hear on Karo Kura Konection and Kompin and that it is relevant to their lives. This is consistently validated by mentors - in November 2022, 98% of mentors reported that girls believe the storyline and discussion and 100% of mentors said that the drama is relevant or very relevant to girls' lives.

For girls' who are part of the Girls' Circle Collective programme, the power of the radio drama and talkshow is augmented further through access to young-women

mentors, a social network of friends, girl-only spaces, adult allies and financial access.

Seeing the change in girls

When we meet girls in their communities they tell us about the drama and share how they're questioning, collectivising, and resisting. In the same 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. This is consistently validated by mentors' feedback, partners' reports and observations and our own interactions with girls during visits to their communities.

Here we draw out some of the storylines and align headline insights we have built up since the first broadcasts in 2020.

Building solidarity

The five girls and the creation of their Girls' Circle Collective is a central storyline focused on their friendship and trust, support of each other, their problem solving, joy and laughter.

Out-of-school girls are often pushed to the fringes of their communities and sit at the centre of a negative discourse about them. The drama directly challenges this notion, and feedback from both girls and mentors demonstrates that this role-modelling through the drama is translating to girls' lives - increasing their social networks and capital.

"I now know the meaning of friendship, before this time girls in our community used to argue and keep malice a lot, but through the girls' circle has made us see ourselves as friends and family."

Girl (age 18)

"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."

Girl (age 14)

"They are learning to be courageous and self-reliance and how to love and support each other in happiness and sadness."

Mentor

"Lucy is my favorite because she motivated me towards being with girls and how sisterhood is very important in the circle, example when Mariatu has fistula she was encouraging her and giving her hope with the other girls this teaches me how a mentor should stand for her mentees from starting till end with faith."

Mentor

Resisting violence

Two storylines reflect the realities of being in unhealthy and abusive relationships with a male partner. Finda was being emotionally and physically abused by her boyfriend, while Kadie, who was only 14, was in an abusive marriage to an older

man, who raped her. With the support of friends from their Girls' Circle and some trusted adult allies, each girl is able to challenge and change their situation.

These storylines offer girls insight into naming these experiences as violence and shows how the characters create strategies to change their realities. Across our learning, girls and young women mentors share how they are mirroring this in their daily lives - leaving abusive partners, reporting the perpetrators of violence and, in some, cases standing up to their families and rejecting child marriage.

"I was in a relationship with an abusive partner, I left him because I get to learn about violence in my club."

Girl (age 19)

"I am bold now to deny my husband of sex if I don't want to."

Girl (age 16)

"I'm now reporting to the Chief the violence perpetrated by my husband on me. My husband is an old man and has another wife in the house. I never intended to marry him but my stepfather forced me to."

Girl (age 17)

"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]."

Girl (age 15)

“One of the girls told me that she never knew she had control over her body until karo kura she heard about her right.”

Mentor

Strategising against transactional sex

Mariatu’s storyline is grounded in the consequences of transactional sex. In needing to feed her family and buy basic necessities, a man takes advantage of her situation and offers her money in exchange for sex. This results in a pregnancy.

Storylines that follow, address this vulnerability and provide girls with a strategy to create alternative income options. Lucy and Titi plant a small garden and sell the harvest to make an income, Yaema starts a bike riding business as an Ocado driver, and the girls start a cloth period pad business.

Survival for adolescent girls in the communities we work in, often means being solicited into transactional sex. Mariatu’s story is one that is all too familiar to girls. Creating incomes for themselves offers a strategy and a safety net of money and savings that they can rely on to meet their basic needs and the emergencies that arise in their lives. Across 600+ Girls’ Circle Collectives, we know that girls and young women mentors are being inspired at scale to form individual or collective businesses - from farming and fishing, to soap-making, savings programmes and petty trading. We hear directly from girls and mentors that this gives them the power to reject transactional sex and provide for themselves.

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

Girl (age 18)

“Because what they advised has helped shape my life as a girl. I used to be in the street to find money but now I am selling okra or vegetables to take care of myself.”

Girl (age 17)

“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.”

Girl (age 14)

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

Mentor

Understanding our bodies

Titi's storyline addresses the stigma girls feel about their periods. She begins to talk openly with her friends about the challenges she finds in managing her periods.

Together they create individual menstruation counting patterns and celebrate their

growing into adolescence. Titi learns to make cloth pads that the girls then make to sell on as a result.

What is clear from our data, is that both girls and mentors are benefiting greatly from the storylines and messages around periods that reduce the taboo topic. There are also examples of girls making reusable period pads, mirroring the storyline entirely.

“We are learning a lot from this new series about our body and the changes our body go through as girls about period how to make cloth pad and how to handle the different changes our body.”

Mentor

“They learned about using locally made period pads because of the economic situation in the country. They now improvise instead of buying the imported pads.”

Mentor

“They have learned how to take care of them self during the menstruation period.”

Mentor

Increasing choice and power over sexual and reproductive health

Mariatu’s pregnancy storyline served as an entry point to a healthcare facility and the introduction of a trusted adult ally in the form of Nurse Zainab. Through the drama, she continues to provide the characters with accurate information and advice about

contraception, maternal and child health, periods, STIs and, in the latest storyline, obstetric fistula.

Learning shows that girls' knowledge about their sexual health and reproductive rights is increasing due to these storylines, and that some are already acting on what they are hearing.

“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 (age 16)

“It has helped me a lot about family planning, just after I had a miscarriage, my boyfriend asks me to give birth to another child, but I refused. Currently I am on prevention (injection).”

Girl (age 18)

“My girls now know the effect of [fistula] that Mariatu gets when she is given birth to her baby.”

Mentor

“[Nurse Zainab] always advice girls to prevent so that they can not get unwanted pregnancy”

Mentor

“they learn that fistula is a disease but as a girl or woman, you should not hide it to yourself...you should go to the nearest hospital for medication”.

Mentor

Transforming perceptions about people with disabilities

Sia’s physical disability is a prominent part of the story arc. She repeatedly challenges the stigma and stereotypes that girls with disabilities face in their communities.

Evidence shows that girls and mentors listening who have disabilities, are questioning their own internal narratives and how they’ve been socialised to see their own disabilities. Sia is helping them to imagine and create new futures and realities for themselves.

We feel the narrative significantly shifting among other girls and mentors and how the alternative views and realities about people with disabilities in the drama is catalysing this change. A survey with 100 girls from Girls’ Circles Collectives in October 2021 showed that 50% - one in two - girls say their views on girls with disabilities have changed since joining Girls’ Circles Collectives.

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

Girl (age 17)

“Sia makes us aware that even though we are disabled it doesn't mean we have nothing to offer or we can't make it. We should be determined. I feel really happy about Sia in the drama. Before, when everybody went to the farm in the morning I was left alone. But now I know my rights and what to do and what not to do.”

Mentor

“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 (age 18)

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

Mentor

Inside the Circle

You can read further about how girls experience the Girls' Circle Collectives in our 2022 publication *Inside the Circle*, available [here in plain text](#) on the Purposeful website.

From the girl outwards: what's happening in the world around her

Cultural notions of girlhood are already showing signs of shifting – we see this in the language of partners and in community stakeholders. As the initiative continues, we are seeing the early signs of how this might ladder up to sustained, systemic change for girls.

While girls are the primary target audience for the radio drama and talkshow, we know from mentors' reports and anecdotally that listenership extends well beyond them. According to the 2015 Population and Housing Census, 66% of households in Sierra Leone own a radio, while 71.1% report the radio as their main source of information - so with the extensive airing across local and national radio stations, it is conceivable that there is a strong listenership beyond girls.

Through the UNICEF U-Report platform, we hear about individual level changes for those listeners. 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. U-Reporters in Sierra Leone are predominantly male and aged between 20 to 30 years old. At the time of writing (January 2023), there were 213,220 registered U-Reporters in Sierra Leone. Read more about U-Report [on the U-Report website](#).

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

Male U-Reporter

"I think karo kura connection has made me think that girls can do more and also make wise decisions on their own."

Female U-Reporter

"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

“The programme creates a lot of impact. For instance, if a man is in the habit of transactional sex, by listening to this drama, they will know that it should not be so or if you a man who is into beating women, you will also know that that is not a good thing. Women should always be encouraged and I value my relationship with my wife. My wife also has learnt a lot from this programme.”

Male Radio DJ

About Karo Kura Konection and Kompin

- Karo Kura Konection and Kompin is credible and relevant to girls' lives.
- It provides girls with the knowledge base to question, and offers insight into an alternate reality and choices.
- In 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 have previously seen 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.

What Next

Through all that we are learning, and from insights gathered, it is clear that these girls and young women are dismantling the systems that oppress them, and there is little doubt that the drama and talkshow are contributing to that change. Most

tangible are the numerous and repeated stories from girls and young women mentors about how they are accessing decision-making spaces and positions for the first time, and how they are individually and collectively, through small and big acts of resistance, challenging the negative cultural conversations in which they are situated.

As Karo Kura broadens its reach and deepens into new storylines, the process of contextualisation and proximity to girls' lived experience is more important than ever. As we continue to listen, to learn and reflect girls' stories, this storytelling world and its interwoven strands will continue to grow as a movement hub for girls across Sierra Leone and to lift up the power and possibility for girlhood - for girls everywhere.

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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 our work or report, please email us on

info@wearepurposeful.org