

Resourcing Girls' Resistance in Sierra Leone: Emerging Lessons from the With and For Girls Fund

Introduction

Since 2020, metal boxes full of money, full of love, hope, and possibility have moved from Freetown across the length and breadth of Sierra Leone, on boats and bikes, in cars and Okadas, carried in the hands of the young women activists that power the With and For Girls Fund and make up the Purposeful team. Those boxes - sacred and profane - represent a loud and defiant statement about money and to whom it really belongs. They represent the profound possibilities of a world where girls have all that they need and they exist as a powerful affirmation of what already is. They are a symbol of the moves girls are making every day to build a world that is more just and fair and free. This is their story, and ours.

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1. Framing the Funding: What it means to move money to girls

Purposeful is an Africa-rooted global hub for girls' activism. For millennia girls have played a critical role in struggles for freedom and liberation. From Africa's anticolonial movements to the Arab spring to climate justice organising and everything in between, their resistance has always sparked and sustained transformational change. And yet, too often girls are invisibilised, separated from resources and shut out from decision-making spaces, their power deliberately obscured and hidden from view. Centering the political power of young feminists across the world, we work so that girls and their allies have access to the resources, networks, and platforms they need to power their activism and remake the world.

We ground in two truths about Girlhood

One: Patriarchy exerts its control over girls

Entrenched systems of patriarchy, exploitation and domination mean that all girls and women are deeply vulnerable to violence and discrimination. Race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, ability, age, and other factors work together to deepen exclusion and harm even further. Adolescent girls – young, poor, Black, rural – are battling the compound effects of multiple forms of structural inequality, and it is therefore no surprise that they are also the girls who are most hidden and whose voices are most silenced. Although the multiple forms of oppression they face should rightly see them front and centre of donor priorities and policy agendas, they are most likely the ones to be shut out or forgotten. This is how patriarchy exerts its control over girls, even through the very structures meant to act as forces for 'development' and 'progress'. And yet this is only part of the story.

Two: Girls are immensely powerful

While we know girls face extreme vulnerabilities at the intersections of age and gender, we also know that they are immensely powerful. For millennia girls have been organising and agitating at the intersections of multiple movements for justice.

In every village, in every corner of the globe, girls are gathering, reimagining, pushing back to create better worlds for themselves and us all. Girls find ways around and over and through and under – they run, they stay, they build, they birth. They survive. And they don't survive. And most days they can be found – hidden in corners and out in plain sight – whispering with another girl, strategising with other girls, sustaining because of another girl. And in every place, across every epoch, they have been supported by women, old and young alike; women who in silent deeds and in loud action hold and heal, raise up and radicalise a new generation of girls. We know this to be true because we are those girls, we are those women and we are their allies, and everywhere we have been and everywhere we have known the same is true.

Rooted in these truths about girlhood, we resource girls' resistance.

We know that power is money and money is power. Money in the right hands is transformative power. And so, to build power with girls, we must also build mechanisms to get money directly into their hands.

The With and For Girls Fund is the world's first Africa rooted global fund for girls organising and activism, resourcing girls' resistance from the village to the global and everything in between. Working across multiple levels - through global

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

We were born directly from the visions, dreams and organising strategies of girls and young women across Sierra Leone - girls and young women who are working every day to build lives of safety, dignity, and meaning. Girls who could not be more removed from the shifting whims of the development industry and philanthropic agendas, and yet who are also modelling a whole new way of being and doing together in this world - in their relationships, their organising capacities, and their strategies of resistance.

We know that in emergencies the profound challenges that girls face are made worse. We learned in painful and lived ways during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, what happens to girls in health emergencies, in lockdowns, and when commodity prices skyrocket. We launched the Girls' Collective Fund as a local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and as the realities were becoming apparent, began the process of moving money directly to Girls' Collectives, groupings, and formations across rural parts of the country.

We launched the Girls' Collective Fund ready to dance with the challenges of partnering with girl-led groups, and willing to learn and adapt our grant-making processes to make them work for girls.

The Fund puts money directly in the hands of girls without placing barriers on how they apply, receive or use the funding. It supports girls who are radically re-imagining the world right where they are, both through 'small' and 'large' actions, by prioritising bonds of sisterhood and non-hierarchical, expansive decision-making processes and structures. Just as joy is a form and function of girl resistance, the Fund explicitly resources girls' expressions of radical joy. They use their laughter, dance and drama to rebuild themselves, bring others into the group, and claim their voice and their space.

In 2020, 12 Girls' Collectives received grants between 1,500-2,500 USD

In 2021, 8 groups re-applied, and each received 2,500 USD

Supporting girls' organising helps them generate the resources needed to sustain themselves materially - school fees, books, pens, sanitary products and diapers, transport, food, and rent. Even in more progressive philanthropy, a deeply unhelpful division has been drawn between 'service' work and 'organising' and 'advocacy' work, as if it were somehow possible to organise without the material needs of food and shelter being met - as if the struggle for the right to access services, to demand or transform systems and structures of social care have not always been a site for

feminist activism. Knowing all this, and then naming it as the work of justice, is the first step in finding and supporting girls' work.

What does it mean to shift power and money directly into girls' hands in a context where girls are so often removed from resources?

What does it mean to move money in community contexts where there is so little for everyone?

What does it mean to move money to girls who cannot read or write, girls without laptops or patchy internet access, girls who have never encountered the words 'grant' or 'proposal', 'philanthropy' or 'development aid'?

What does this mean in a world where girls holding money and resources is a profound threat to the social order?

To move money directly to girls is an act of solidarity and a political statement of intent, about how the world can and should be. It's also a process of learning, deepening and embedding different world views and different ways of being into organisational practice.

The more the With and For Girls Fund has moved towards girls, the more we are learning about what is possible as an organisation, as a hub for girls, and as infrastructure for girls' movements. The lessons and insights from listening to girls

and understanding their experiences of traditional girls' programming has reinforced what we instinctively know – that so much about development aid is not working.

The more we see how girls are solving challenges themselves, constructing alternative practices for accountability, and modelling horizontal power across their organising, the clearer we are that girls are up to something. They have something truly profound to offer us as activists, as practitioners, as folks who believe another world is possible - that another world is actually already here. In the words of Arundhati Roy:

“The money - when moved right, with love, care, intention and attention - suddenly becomes a portal into another kind of existence.”

Arundhati Roy: 'The pandemic is a portal'

Moving Money to Our Sisters: Resourcing as an Act of Solidarity

To move money to Girls' Collectives in Sierra Leone and across the world is not an abstract act, an act of strategy or logic alone (although it is both of those things in multitudes). Too often, in globalised, Northern grant-making, humanity is stripped right out of philanthropy. It has become faceless - a nameless act of practicality and of process. Somehow neutral, and yet so loaded with a certain way of seeing the world. But for us to move money - as the women we are and as the girls we were - is an act of both strategy and sisterhood, of solidarity and of shared action. We are moving money to our sisters. We name that loudly and we claim it as a political act.

“My grandma and my mom used to give me money from a very young age. I was very good with budgeting, especially if the money was little and needed to go a long way. When I was 6, we lived in a place where food supplies were hard to come by. We would go for months without having tea since we couldn’t buy tea leaves because there was none at the shops. My mom would give me church offerings, and for a period of time, I would buy sweets instead of giving it at church. When my mom discovered this, she started giving me some coins for sweets and some for the church. I’d buy a sweet and then save the rest of the coins. One time, I went to a school event and I carried all my money in a little bag. I went into a shop to buy sweets and found they had tea leaves. I very proudly bought two packets of tea leaves for my mom. From then on, my mom started sending me to the market because she knew I’d bring everything she’d ask for. My story connects to the fact that girls know from a very young age how to handle money and that they are always responding to the practical needs around them. Girls are nurturing - full of love and good thoughts - and whatever they have, benefits others in their ecosystem.”

Purity Kagwiria, Director, With and For Girls, Purposeful

“I can remember while I was growing up in primary school I didn’t have friends. I didn’t feel I fitted in with that class of people. But then I went to high school and met girls who blew my life in different directions - we came from different backgrounds, but had similar stories. From that group of girls I learned everything about sexuality - they taught me about periods, things I couldn’t talk to my mum about. I remember my friend was the first person to tell me I was beautiful. I went home that day and admired myself in the mirror. Up until today, the joy and laughter they brought into

my life is something I will cherish forever. The power and joy I felt with my friends has impacted how I see myself even today, and it's what I see in the Girls' Collectives. How the girls support each other, I know will have a significant impact in their lives years from now."

Isha Morgan Conteh, Programme Manager, With and For Girls, Purposeful

"Growing up, I didn't have many friends and I was the only girl child in my family. I have three friends now and they no longer live in Freetown, and it's difficult to pick up the phone and just call them as I feel they may be dealing with their own issues, so I feel that void. Seeing these girls come together, and knowing that they are friends, sisters, and they can depend on each other - even if they are coming from a family where they are the only girl, they know they have a community they can count on. Seeing how girls are now able to stand up to leaders in their community, talk about their rights makes me wish I had that when I was younger. I needed that in my life growing up - a support system to allow me to speak up. I hope my daughters have that."

Aminata Kamara, Senior Programme Manager, With and For Girls, Purposeful

2. Collectivising as girls in Rural Sierra Leone: A Snapshot

To be together as girls, to pool resources and to use the power of those resources to push back is almost universal in the lives of the girls we meet. Yet so very little is known about how girls construct their communal lives.

Grasping the possibilities of girls' collectivising can be hard, like sand running through the hand. So much of what girls are showing and offering us is fleeting. It's shrouded in secrecy as they hide the truth of their togetherness from an often hostile outside gaze, and modelled in micro-moments as they struggle to feed themselves and their children in the day to day. But when we sit quietly and listen hard, when we earn girls' trust - enough that they can speak out loud with us - we feel something shift underneath.

Yoyema is a village in Kayamba chiefdom, Moyamba district, in the southern part of Sierra Leone. The village is seated on clayish, flat land, and made up of about 60 mud-brick houses. There is one tap water source at the centre of the village and one public river. The village has two primary schools - a United Methodist Church (UMC) Primary and an Islamic Council of Schools Primary. To access a secondary school, children must travel to Moyamba town, the district headquarter-town.

It is here that Kadiatu, Fanny, Sinnah, Sento, Mattah, and Rosaline came together in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to start a kitchen garden as a way to make sure they could stay in school. The girls had always worked on other people's farms to earn a living after school. They had been pooling their earnings for a long time as a way to help manage some of the shocks that they each had to navigate - finding

ways to avoid marriage and stay in school because of the power of their shared resources. But the girls had never managed to step out of the cycle of farm labouring, and staying in school was becoming increasingly challenging. They always imagined starting their own small farm garden, but such a thing was far out of their reach. Where would the money come from in a place like this to help girls build their dreams?

Through the Girls' Collectives Fund, the girls brought to life their garden in Yoyema Village. They paid some workers to brush and clear the land for them, and they planted okra, jute, pepper, cucumber, and other vegetables to sell at the market. They are now getting bolder with their decisions, with plans to plant groundnuts ready for the rainy season and buy a motorbike for commercial purposes with a hired rider to generate daily cash. They are also planning to use the same bike to go to school and return to the village every school day, as they usually walk over 7km (5 miles) every morning and the same distance back home.

For Sinnah and Sento, the profits have been critical because they live with a disabled single parent mother, so resources are profoundly limited and staying in school is a struggle. The profits meant they could buy pens, paper and uniforms, pay for extra lessons and, most importantly, sit the National Primary School Examination. To know what it means for girls like this, in a place like this, to sit this most crucial exam is to know the cruelty of this world, and the beauty of it too.

To put money into girls' hands in places like these is creating ripples around girls in ways known and unknown. With literal power in their hands, girls begin to reshape

the world around them. They push back against the deeply extractive nature of their existence, where their bodies are treated like credit cards and where transactional sex is so normalised that girls are expected to give themselves up for even the most basic of commodities like transport. With power in their hands girls are reshaping the landscape of their shared existence.

Imagine what happens when girls can say no.

Or say yes.

Rogbere Junction is a semi-rural area, seated on the highway leading to the Port Loko and Lunsar town in Port Loko district. The town is a major business hub for surrounding towns and villages.

“Some of us that live far from the meeting place can have bad encounters on the way here because most bike riders that we hitch a ride with, propose love to us and if you say no, that might cause problems. But if a girl has money, she can afford to pay her transport fare and no man can take advantage of her sexually. And with money, girls can learn to trade.

It is good for a girl to have her own money so that no man can use and dump her like an object of only sexual gratification. No man can say to her, ‘Look, take this five thousand Leones and follow me to my room.’ A girl with money can also be able to start up her own business.

We had a lot of challenges when the money came in. Many people used to say that the money we received will amount to nothing in our hands. So, our parents started harassing our mentor so that she can give them the money. But our mentor stood her ground insisting that that she won't allow them to destroy [our] goals and that we are going to be involved in a Collective.”

In conversation with Mariama and Adamsay's Group, Port Loko District

Girls aren't only motivated by their small circles, by their own needs and dreams. Perhaps the most striking feature of girls' collectivism in rural Sierra Leone is their commitment to remake the world around them - to use the power of their shared voices, and the power of shared resources, to lift other girls up and to bring other girls in. They challenge what is known and expected about the trajectories of their lives as girls.

“We have agreed to meet here every day by 4pm but sometimes we forget because of the chores at home. But as soon as the mentor comes to the safe space and hits the drum that is over there, our parents/guardians will relieve us from our chores and all of us will rush to come.

Also, we play football matches on some Fridays and Saturdays at 4 pm and when we are playing the football match, we go round the area celebrating and taking

photos as well as encouraging those that have dropped out of school, because they got pregnant, to join our group.

Every Friday we act out dramas and then invite our parents/ guardians and other girls to watch. During our dramas, we talk about teenage pregnancy and early marriage and how to prevent and protect ourselves.

Sometimes, our mentor surprises us with books for us to read and she makes sure that she gives us books that are one year ahead of our current grades. We read the books here and see how far our reading skills have improved, and after that we act out the drama. One of our colleagues here was living in shame because she got pregnant while in school, but when she joined our group, our mentor bought some things for her to encourage her to come for the group meetings.”

In conversation with Anette's Group

As girls come together to pool resources and dream of lives of self-reliance, they are transcending the life trajectories laid out for them before birth. In a context where there is so little for everyone and girls are the last of the last, to access resources, and then define the nature of those resources, is to have access to a power commodity that is shifting the very fact of what it means to be a girl in rural Sierra Leone. Girls are building businesses together, saving together, and staying in school together through the fact of their shared resources. But more than that, they are bringing other girls along with them, and they are crafting alternative images of what

it means to be a girl, for their sisters and the wider community. To be with girls in these contexts is to be given a profoundly privileged window into a world of alternative possibilities.

3. The Politics of Practice: How we move money to girls

If, as we have done so far, we understand the expansive possibilities of moving money directly to girls in a context where they are so profoundly distanced from resources, we are also forced to confront the sometimes-absurd limitations of traditional grant-making practice in that same endeavour. To build out a set of processes to do this work is also to build a politics of practice for grant-making to girls, because the very nature of the practices we must deploy act as a stark reminder of the politics of money and to where it most usually resides.

To even begin to imagine the act of moving this money to girls in Moyamba and Port Loko is an act of political opposition in a context where notions of risk and reward are so skewed in the favour of so few, at the expense of so many. To sit in a budget meeting and plan for this work; to go to the market and buy a metal box, lock and key; to plan the journey on boat and bike; to send a WhatsApp number out into the world; to listen to the voice notes that come back; and to then sit patiently with auditors each year as we explain the 'what', the 'why' and 'how' - these are the carefully crafted strategies, the theories and practices of political actors embedded in processes of political action both local and transnational.

In this next section, we lift up some of the challenges of the usual grant-making process in supporting girl-led work, and offer some of our own emerging solutions. We hope these practices provide useful prompts or inspiration for others learning what it means to do more and better work with girls too.

Step One: Moving beyond the usual funding criteria

The Challenge:

Making funding accessible to girls requires breaking down the barriers that girls and young feminists have told us excludes them from funding. And what's the very first barrier girls tell us over and over again? The funding criteria. We held conversations with girls and young feminist organisers to inform the development of the With and For Girls strategic plan.

Girls' Collectives are often unregistered groups, meeting as and when they can or need to meet, and often with no formal structures or processes in place. They make decisions as a Collective and don't have 'leaders' in the traditional hierarchical sense, but rather, self-selected mentors and advisers who support and guide them. Their agendas shift as their lives evolve and respond to the context they live in - always in motion and not stuck to a specific theme or issue. Even groups made up of under 19 year-olds become multi-generational. With little or no access to funding, they often prioritise income generation in order to sustain the collective.

Emerging Solutions:

The only funding criteria is that the group should be mainly constituted of girls under 19. There is no requirement for registration or expectation of having previously received funding, no requirement for references from a former donor, no specific thematic area of funding, no affiliation to a national NGO or a youth group, and no requirement for a bank account.

Step Two: A lesson in responsive outreach

The Challenge:

The majority of girls in Sierra Leone do not have access to a phone or computer, so we had to go beyond the usual social media outreach to share information via radio broadcast, including a range of jingles and Public Service Announcements (PSAs), aired on hundreds of community radio stations and through a range of community networks. We also knew that even then, there would be girls who would still not receive this information without access to a radio. We extended our timelines for the funding process, so that we could reach more girls in intensive outreach. Flexibility in timelines and planning for outreach processes is a necessary part of funding Girls' Collectives.

Yet still, Girls' Collectives and their initiatives remain unknown to most organisations and funders, and they often go unrecognised or invisible. Where they are recognised, their contributions are not valued or deemed worthy of receiving funding, partly because of the 'development' mindset that places value on formal organising, but also due to value systems which place girls as subordinate and incapable of managing money, let alone receive institutional funding. Despite sharing our funding criteria within our networks, we still had very few groups applying for the Fund or recommended to us.

Emerging Solutions:

We kept going, extended our timelines again, and worked closely with the Salone Adolescent Girls Network, as well as other members of our team. This network is a

coalition of over 150 local, national, and international organisations in Sierra Leone, supported, convened and funded by Purposeful. We reached out to former colleagues, family members, and young activists across our networks. We leaned into our personal relationships. Through these multiple approaches, we identified an initial set of 12 Girls' Collectives; 8 in Moyamba (in the south) and 4 in Port Loko (in the north).

“Although we talked to many organisations and stakeholders to ask about girl-led groups, people often told us they did not know of any. Most people just didn't recognise them as groups. We couldn't travel to search for groups because of COVID-19 travel restrictions, but we did not give up.”

Isha Morgan Conteh

Step Three: Supporting girls to apply for funding

The Challenge:

Application processes are often another barrier to girls accessing funds. Forms are all too often in a language that girls do not speak, using jargon they do not understand, asking for information they do not have, and through online portals they cannot access.

Emerging Solutions:

Girls can apply by phone or simplified application process. We arranged for local contacts with phones to meet with Girls' Collectives so we could speak to them

directly and support their grant application by phone call. Initial calls were made to share information about the funding opportunity, with follow up calls then scheduled to complete entirely oral applications.

Where possible, we prioritised in-person discussions, in Krio, English or the local language of the group.

In addition, we simplified the language in our application form, to ensure that it would be easy for girls to understand and complete, asking only the most critical questions to inform the funding decision; how they intended to use the funding and their rationale, and how they would make decisions regarding the use of the funding going forward.

“When girls buy things for themselves using their grant, they buy things we would have never thought to buy.”

Isha Morgan Conteh

Step Four: The power of the metal box in symbol and in practice

The Challenge:

For most Girls' Collectives - especially in rural Sierra Leone, but across the world - the requirement to receive money through a bank account immediately disqualifies them from funding opportunities.

Emerging Solutions:

Girls receive the money in whichever way works best for them. In Collectives where a member of the group had a bank account they were nominated to receive the funds. For those who wanted to, and were able, our team worked with girls' groups to nominate a member to open an account. They supported girls to apply for identity cards and to navigate banking processes - the intention, to set girls up for the long term with a practical avenue for receiving funding from other sources in the future.

Still, navigating the banking system is a huge challenge for most girls, especially in more rural areas, and the majority of groups opted to receive their grants in cash. The, now famous, red metal boxes were used to deliver the first tranche of cash to girls, with a second delivery made later in the year based on an agreed upon timeline between Purposeful and the Collectives. The team travelled from Freetown to the various communities of Port Loko and Moyamba to deliver the cash in person, covering around 500 kilometres over a few days in order to get the money directly into the hands of girls. These boxes are now way more than simple containers of money - they have become powerful symbols for the value of Girls' Collectives and their organising.

“We give the money directly to the girls and they receive it together. They are accountable to each other. They are responsible for the money and how it is managed. This breaks the thinking that girls always need an adult eye! The way we give money to girls dispels this thinking.”

In conversation with Aminata, Purity, and Isha

Step Five: Grant agreements and collective accountability - managing money while nurturing the Collective

The Challenge:

Girls have not been trusted with money, so have limited experience of managing it and even less doing it collectively. There are some instances where disagreements on the use of funds have created harm in the Collective. At the same time, most of the usual accountability and financial management processes we draw on in philanthropy are designed for formal organisational structures and hierarchical accountability mechanisms.

The challenge for us as we moved into a financial relationship with Girls' Collectives was to resist the pull towards these processes, because they naturally force a 'professionalisation' or 'NGO-isation' among the groups - the exact opposite of what we are trying to support!

Emerging Solutions:

- **The box, the key and the ledger:** The box and ledger are kept by one girl and the key by another, so that at the very least, two members of the Collective are present when handling the money. All deposits or withdrawals are noted on the ledger. In addition, when delivering the cash, no public announcement is made regarding handing over of the cash, only two team members deliver the cash, as a large team presence attracts too much attention.

- **Encourage collective decision-making on the use of funds:** We build in time during the application process for the Collective to first discuss the proposed use of the grant, as well as during the handing over of the cash to girls. This holds space to make collective commitments on how the funds are to be spent and forms an accountability agreement between us all.
- **Clarify the offer of 'flexible funding':** Although it's critical to allow groups to shift their priorities as needed, these parameters were not always clear for some groups. Some went on to implement initiatives that were no longer relevant to their contexts, simply because they didn't understand that they had full control on how to use the funds. So, at the first meeting with girls, we clarify exactly how they can use the funds, drawing on examples and scenarios in their local language.
- **Deliver the cash in tranches:** Even though the safety mechanism for groups receiving their grant is in cash, it's useful to include a moment with the Collectives to reflect and re-strategise before receiving the full grant. We deliver grants in two separate payments, and in discussion with the mentors, as well as members of the team when the first cash box is delivered.

Step Six: Ongoing engagement, accompaniment and support to navigate the reality of resources

The Challenge:

All of the Girls' Collectives are first-time recipients of grants, and have never been individually trusted with money. Therefore, collectively managing funds can be a complex process. With Purposeful's team based in Freetown, several hours away from the closest group - we are not able to give the in-person support needed for meaningful and ongoing accompaniment, nor are we always the best option for accompaniment given the grantee partner and donor power dynamics that remain, despite our efforts to build a relationship based on trust.

Emerging Solutions:

- **Formal and informal mentorship:** Several of the groups have a mentor who meets with the girls on a regular basis (weekly and sometimes bi-weekly). These mentors are volunteers who have continued to meet with the girls following the end of a formal INGO program, or who the girls have self-selected to act in an advisory capacity for their group. The mentors share information with the girls, provide guidance as needed, regarding the use and management of their grant and in some instances, provide an adult voice to push back against any potential coercion in the community about the use of funds. Not all groups have access to a mentor, but still require support and accompaniment. Purposeful has hired a young woman consultant who conducts regular visits to the groups. She has become a critical ear to

Collectives, helping them navigate conflict and devise strategies to productively engage with the community.

- **Community engagement:** Include ongoing engagement between the team and community power holders to create space to share the objectives and rationale for giving grants to Girls' Collectives. In addition to making the community aware of this initiative, it serves as an opportunity to mitigate any potential pressure or coercion of groups on how to use the funding. The pressure to hand over money is still very real in girls' lives, it has very real impacts on the Collectives' ability to move together in the world, and is perhaps the most explicit of all the challenges, requiring ongoing care and attention.
- **Learning as we go:** The ongoing engagement and accompaniment process is the main way of learning from the Girls' Collectives. These processes also form the basis of our own internal accountability and reporting mechanisms, meaning that we do not have to ask girls for a formal report.
- **Integrated decision-making:** Due to covid restrictions, in-person meetings during the first year were limited, so the team kept in touch with mentors via WhatsApp and phone calls. In groups that had a phone, communication was directly with the girls themselves. In addition, the visits to deliver the second tranche of grants were used as an opportunity to check in with the girls, to understand their progress towards their goals, their challenges and their hopes moving forward. Conversations and in-person engagements have been

essential in informing the decisions to renew funding for the majority of groups. Working in this way means we are able to foreground girls' needs and experiences, rather than be driven by funders' questions.

What is surfacing?

- **Collect only what you need:** Clarify the objectives and use of all the questions you pose and keep the application process simple. Interrogate the need for reporting, consider where the burden for information gathering should sit, and use learning and accompaniment processes as accountability mechanisms where possible.
- **Allocate sufficient time and resources:** Be realistic about how long it will take to find groups. Multiple methods for outreach beyond social media are required and your informal networks will be your best friend. Never be afraid to lean into the process. Make sure you assign a budget for phone calls and travel - the process should and must cost more than an online-only grants process. Work at girls' pace and around their schedules, acknowledging that collective decision-making takes time and requires a particular flow.
- **Pay particular attention to the power at the moment you move the money:** It is at this precise moment that the instinct to fall back on the 'safe' received wisdom of grant-making is likely to be most pronounced. Engage your finance teams early - you'll be surprised by how creative and expansive their thinking can be if they are fully embedded in the design. Share your anxieties as a team and come back together on an ongoing basis to assess risk.

- **Let go of expectations for growth, formalisation or rapid change, and communicate this clearly to groups:** Receiving money can be a burden if it is accompanied by an expectation for groups to register, to reach more girls with their initiatives, or to have sparked and sustained meaningful change in a short period. This type of expectation limits girls' creativity and ability to be responsive to the needs they identify. It creates pressure to organise in ways that are not organic and that can cause groups to crumble. Make it clear from the start of the relationship that there are no expected outcomes, that change is complex and takes time, and that 'failure' is allowed. When you do, you'll be surprised just how much girls share with you about the dynamics of their work, and just how much this will teach you about the processes of social change.
- **This work cannot happen at a distance:** Ultimately this work requires a deep presence in the places where you are moving money and a deep ability to move towards girls - both literally and figuratively. This offers real challenges for globally rooted grant-makers and real opportunities to consider how we move in solidarity transnationally when we do not have a large staff presence in every country we are committed to moving money to. The role of young activist advisory networks can be particularly critical here.
- **Re-orient your views of 'risk':** Trust is at the core of our approach to working with girls. We don't have an onerous due diligence process - the collectives often have no institutional references, nor have they ever received and managed a grant. We view any potential risk therein, as worth it. The few illegitimate groups or Collectives who misuse funds, should not stop us from

reaching the many Collectives in need of support. In addition, we operate on the belief that with the right support model, girls can manage the grant, navigate the sometimes-complex nature of working as a Collective and that they will make good use of the funds - and 'good use' is defined by them in response to their reality at the time. We also are comfortable with 'failure' and place no expectations on groups. This gives them room to experiment, fail, and try again.

4. Breakthrough Learnings: How girls are unlocking the power of resources

Change is complex and not linear. We know that change takes time, but even so, girls' access to resources has already begun to spark shifts and changes within Girls' Collectives and beyond - in their families, in the lives of girls who are not members of the Collectives, as well as in their communities. The money has both a material and symbolic significance.

- **Materially**, receiving funding has enabled girls to meet their practical and immediate needs, and also to fund their longer-term strategic interests, supporting them to actualise their collective goals.
- **Symbolically**, trusting girls with money, and their possession of resources has challenged long held negative beliefs and narratives, and upturned power dynamics within the community and their families.

Below are some of the shifts and changes that have started to occur.

“I’ve grown up hearing that you shouldn’t give girls money, but I know that it is a way of holding girls back, preventing them from having a sense of independence, from feeling powerful. My experience with the Girls’ Collectives has confirmed what I always knew; that girls know how to use their money, and can be trusted to use it in impactful ways.”

Isha Morgan Conteh

Increased awareness of their power & possibilities

Trusting girls with money has challenged the narratives they have grown up hearing and internalising regarding girls' inability to use money well. A grant that they can use however they choose to, has opened up a whole new world of possibilities. The Girls' Collectives now hold strong convictions in their ability to change their own lives, to manage and use money well, to establish and run meaningful initiatives, and to influence thinking and conversations in their communities. This greater awareness of their power and belief in new possibilities for their lives is immeasurable but significant. The refusal to be defined by the negative narratives that hold girls and women back is a shift that will stay with the girls beyond the funding relationship with Purposeful. This shift in belief and mindset is showing up in how girls are dreaming, organising, and pushing back.

"It is not only adults that can embark on gardening - we the girls can also embark on gardening for ourselves"

Girls in Gbere Junction

The idea is brilliant but how do you intend on getting a plot of land?

"If we can get enough funds, we can visit the paramount chief and we can convince him to give us a plot of land."

What if he doesn't give you the land?

“If he doesn’t give us the land, we will use the money to buy a plot of land and then start up a business. From the sales we can start building our safe space.”

Girls in conversation with Aminata during a visit to deliver their money

“Given that girls in Sierra Leone have grown up seeing mainly men as owners of land, the fact that they can even think “I can have land” - and have great ideas on land ownership as a collective is amazing.”

Aminata Kamara

Changing girls’ lives through acts of solidarity

Girls’ Collectives are using their resources to change the lives of girls in their Collectives and beyond. At the height of the pandemic, girls used the first funding for their basic needs; providing for themselves and their families, and providing support to other girls outside of their Collectives who needed financial assistance. The ability to address immediate needs like transport costs to attend school, money for food for themselves and their families, was a significant financial relief.

“We felt happy when we received the money because we no longer had to allow men to exploit us sexually because of money. We now use the money to do a lot of things and meet our basic needs.”

“My hope for this year is financial independence. We want to ensure that the rate of teenage pregnancy, domestic violence, early marriage and physical abuse decreases in our community.”

In conversation with Annette's group

Using the profits generated through their various initiatives, girls have continued to provide this type of financial support. The Collectives have used their grants to pay for girls' contraceptives, for school supplies and fees for members of the Collective not able to afford them, as well as other girls in their community who need the financial support to continue to go to school. These types of expenses, such as school fees or the provision of school materials, are beneficial in the very practical sense of ensuring that girls access education and can fully engage when at school (potentially transforming girls' lives given the role that education plays in securing their autonomy and financial independence). These acts of solidarity also signal to girls across their communities that they have a support system and a collective of girls who believe in them. This connectedness and solidarity with one another is critical in building a strong movement for and by girls. Several of the groups have grown in number, and groups continue to receive requests to join their Collectives.

"This money has brought a lot of positive changes for us and our community. There is a mentee here that dropped out of school because she got pregnant and the man was nowhere to be found. At the end of the day, she also lost her child and so she was feeling a bit down or frustrated. But when she noticed that we were meeting here at the safe space she made some enquiries with my other mentees and she met me. After explaining her story to me and told me that she wanted to go back to school, we decided as a group to give her a second chance."

Mentor

Visibility and Recognition of Girls in their Communities

As our challenging outreach process through our local networks has indicated, most of the Girls' Collectives were not recognised as collectives or groups that were eligible or even worthy to receive funding. Since receiving funding, the Collectives are significantly more visible and recognised as valuable spaces for girls. Their possession of this grant means they are perceived differently - they now have access to and can utilise their social capital to navigate and negotiate within the community in ways they could not before. This opens up opportunities and new possibilities for girls.

“People now respect and value girls’ groups in the community. They are now recognised as groups and organisations working in the community through the Fund. The Fund brought a sense of pride for girls in their community. We feel proud and confident.

There are lots of organisations run by elderly people in this community that have never received such funds but we have. We never thought an organisation would trust us, a group of young girls with funds or such an amount of money.”

Mentor

“As soon as we received the money, people learned to respect us and our opinions.”

“If a girl has money, she can have her own choice of a man when it’s time for her to get married but if she doesn’t have money she might be forced to drop out from school and even get pregnant as a teenager.”

“It is important for girls to have money because most of our parents have the tendency to sell their girls to rich old men for money, even though they know that it is a bad decision. But if she has money, even her mother will respect her opinion.”

In conversation with Mabel and Abibatu's group

5. Moving Forward with Girls' Collectives

We are a political home for girls. See the [With and For Girls Strategic Plan](#) for more details. At the core of our resourcing resistance strategy is a commitment to fund and support girls in ways which are aligned with their realities and needs. As we aim to continue to fund girls with intentionality, we have reflected on how these learnings, emerging over the past year and a half, will inform how we adapt and move forward. Over the coming year, the With and For Girls and Purposeful team will adapt and grow our Girls' Collectives funding model as follows:

- **Support and compensate mentors:** The young women who engage with Girls' Collectives as mentors on a voluntary basis will now all receive stipends. Their ongoing support and guidance for the Girls' Collectives is a valuable form of in-person accompaniment, and we believe that this work should be compensated. In addition, we will create regular check-ins with the mentors to better understand how we can support them and the Collectives they mentor.
- **Commit to multi-year grants:** In the initial 'pilot' year of the grant, we awarded one-off grants, and based on our ongoing engagement with groups, made a decision to renew their grants, as well as, increase the grant amounts. However, we know that multi-year grants as opposed to annual renewals, offer sustainability, and allow collectives to develop and carry out longer-term plans, as opposed to continuously seeking additional funding.
- **Support Girls' Collectives to meet in-person:** While based in different communities and engaged in different activities, we know that the girls can

learn so much from each other - from the strategies they use to how they respond to backlash - and serve as a reminder to each other that they are not alone and that there are other girls, just like them, resisting and transforming their communities. Connection, sisterhood and solidarity are a critical part of the resilience of Collectives and building a strong movement with and for girls.

- **Try this model elsewhere and continue to learn by doing:** We're taking all that we've learned from Girls' Collectives in Sierra Leone to implement this funding and accompaniment approach in Kenya, where we hope to strengthen our model and develop a strategy on how to carry out this type of initiative, even in places where we do not have a large staff presence.
- **Trust girls with money for girls:** As we've been doing this, we've realized that adults front girls as leaders for girls work and resources but the girls' aren't in decision-making about the work and the resources. We will be bold in funding girls directly. We'll continually take the time to listen to girls direct us on how they ought to receive funding. We'll hold space and carry the cost of transferring money to girls directly in a world where girls cannot hold bank accounts due to age and access.

Credits

Authors: Boikanyo Modungwa, Isha Conteh, Aminata Kamara, Purity Kagwiria and Rosa Bransky

Artwork and Design: Nzilani Simu

Editorial: Erin Barnes

Girls' and mentors' 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.

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 publication, please email us on info@wearepurposeful.org

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Purposeful: Remaking the world with and for girls.

Purposeful Sierra Leone: 2 Lewis Drive, Hill Station, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Purposeful UK: Studio 3a, Blue House Yard, 5 River Park Road, London N22 7TB

www.wearepurposeful.org