

The State of Out-of-School Girls in *Sierra Leone*



Findings across six districts

Summary

The Girls' Circles baseline survey affirmed what we know – that girls' lives in Sierra Leone, especially those who are out of school, are characterised by multiple hardships: little to no education; the ubiquity of transactional sex; teen pregnancy; and everyday violence. Whilst little of this will be new for those who know Sierra Leone, the scale of these issues (which are likely to be under reported) is shocking, as is their everyday nature – girls struggling, for example, to identify violence where it is simply part of the fabric of their daily lives.

The context for this is a life lived in gendered poverty, with significant social-cultural limitations on (materially) opportunities, assets, resources and (culturally) power, voice, and expectations. A restricted set of dominant narratives cast girls as sources of income, future wives and mothers with few other models available – even if this normative model only rarely shows up in the more complex reality. Society attempts to police this limited scope for girls, which is often internalised by girls themselves, providing further justification for keeping them from assets and opportunities. It manifests in social control over girls' lives, leading to, in their lived experience, limited choices they can imagine and actually access. In the midst of all this, there is an insidious 'choice' narrative, that denies or neglects the lack of options, and so can often place blame for girls' situations on their shoulders and as the result of their limited choices.

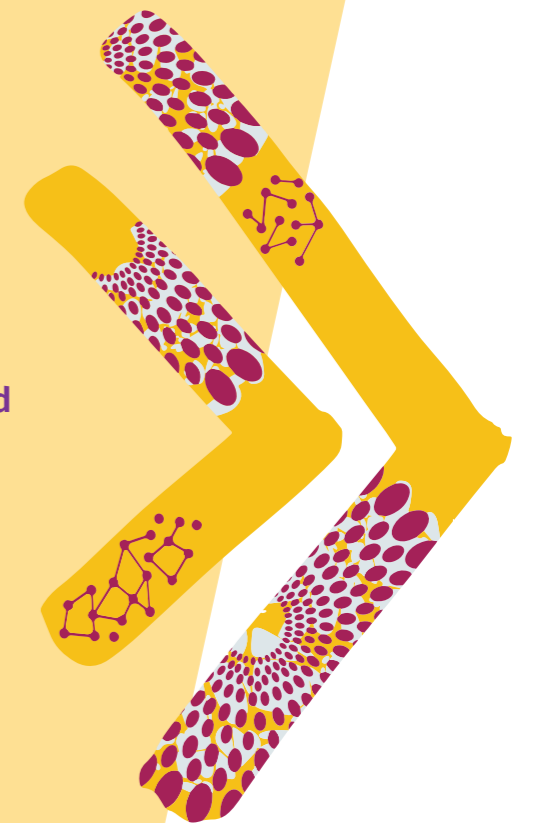
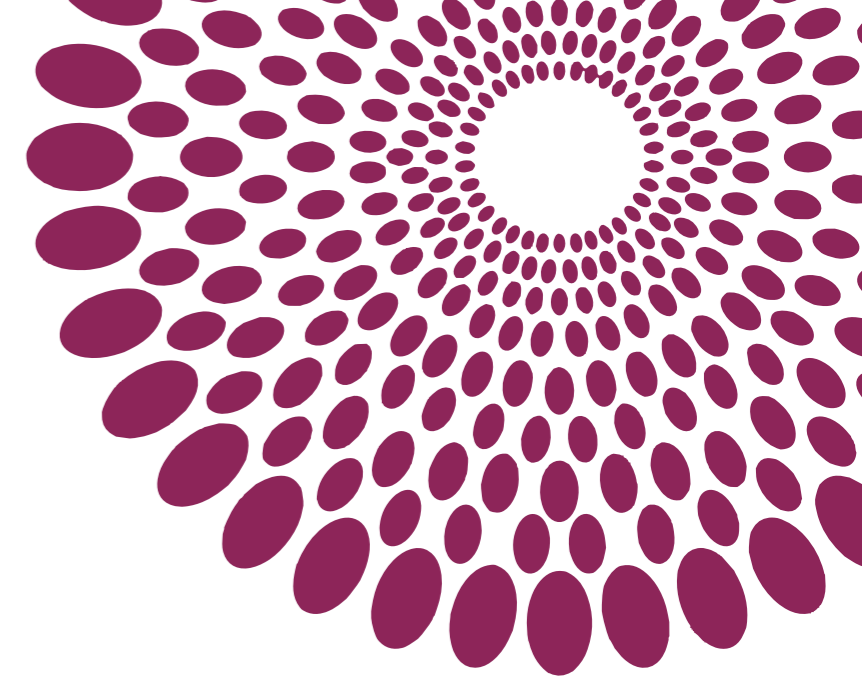
Whilst it is true that girls are regularly choosing between a palette of dehumanising options for their everyday lives from a position of no or minimal power, it is not the case that everything is done to girls or that we should see girls as victims. They are already often doing extraordinary things to get by and support themselves, and when given further space or platforms, girls take action – they want more for themselves and are primed to be agents of change over their own lives. This helps explain the significant impact we've already seen from the Girls' Circles programming – girls are questioning their situations, refusing early marriage, returning to school, and starting businesses and saving schemes together. This impact has been delivered through the radio show content but also through the safe space format where power relations are more equalised and girls feel more comfortable to speak up, ask questions, and start to live in their full power.

As such, there is a need to subvert current narratives, which often either blame girls for making bad choices – assuming too much choice and power – or see things as being entirely done to girls, with girls in need of protection. The reality is neither of these – yes, girls' situations are constrained by gendered poverty, but they are primed to change their lives for the better when there is a shift in their ability to access and imagine their choices.

Building on the strong foundations of the Girls' Circles programme, the Karo Kura Girls' Circles Collectives will grow to open up opportunities and new visions, enabling girls to take action and change things for themselves. Girls' Circle Collectives will create self and collective guided opportunities for girls, supported with mentor-led life skills sessions to enable their journey, girls-centred media and storytelling via Karo Kura Konection and Kompin to inspire and inform, and provide the opportunity to apply for micro grants to further advance the goals and ambitions of their Collective.

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Introduction and approach

Background

Girls have been pushing back since time immemorial – in their homes, their families, their countries, and across the globe. They have pushed back against the everyday oppressions that are so often synonymous with girlhood, and against the forces that define and form the nature of that oppression. Girls resist marriage, violence, they fight to stay in school, they push back against how other's name them and shame them and seek to separate them from the platforms and resources that are their right. Girls fight to take up space, to access space, and to re-shape space. Girls resist because to resist is to live, is to breathe, and is to be in the world as a girl.

Purposeful believes deeply in resourcing this resistance – from the formal to informal, and individual to the collective.

In early 2020, we were in the process of establishing a safe space model for adolescent girls. Staying true to Purposeful's founding beliefs, as we started to see the reality of the pandemic unfold, we pivoted our design and rapidly developed a virtual safe space for young women mentors. In this virtual space, we provided mentors with support and guidance to bring adolescent girls together in small groups, known simply as Girls' Circles¹. Driven by a suite of mass media products, including Karo Kura Kompin, a weekly radio drama, and Karo Kura Konection, a weekly talk show to accompany the drama series, girl-centred content was shared with over 700 mentors around Sierra Leone via mobile phones. Mentors used this content as a way to engage girls in smaller groups in their communities and it was also shared via national and community radio for mass girls' and community consumption. The aim was to reach the most marginalised cohort of adolescent girls – those out of school, for whom the risks during this period, and in general, are the most extreme.

The pandemic also coincided with changes in the international funding landscape which further caused us to pause, listen, reflect, and adapt. This has been a moment to reimagine our work and meet the evolving needs of girls, grounded in what we have heard and learned directly from girls and their mentors during the crisis. The new funding reality has created an opportunity to transform our ongoing work and to further align with our values and new theory of change.

The result? The Kara Kura Girls' Circles Collectives – autonomous spaces that bring together girls in ways that enable them to analyse the roots of their oppression, strategise for individual and social change, and access resources and assets to bring their strategies to life.

Building on the legacy of the Girls' Circles², the Girls' Circle Collectives create self and collective guided opportunities for girls, supported with mentor-led life skills sessions to enable their journey, girls-centred media, and storytelling via Karo Kura Konection and Kompin to inspire and inform, and the opportunity to apply for micro grants to further advance the goals and ambitions of their Collective.

Run by young women mentors, the Girls' Circle Collectives have access to best-in-class storytelling and a life skills curriculum that is deeply feminist. All content is informed by girls and mentors themselves and centres those who are most marginalised in Sierra Leone. Mentors are supported through a collective journey of feminist consciousness raising as a way to learn and unlearn – and to connect with each other to become an even stronger movement across Sierra Leone. They are then able to use their transformation and movement skills to guide girls through their own feminist journeys.

Purposeful is deeply committed to centering girls and young women in our work. As a part of that commitment, we listen to girls and mentors throughout every aspect of our programming and grantmaking. In 2020, under Girls' Circles, Purposeful conducted a baseline survey to hear from over 2,000 out-of-school girls, aged 13 to 19 years old, across six districts of Sierra Leone. Additionally, mentors shared weekly and, later monthly, reflections with our team through their mobile phones. This has provided us with an incredibly rich range of primary quantitative and qualitative data and is supplemented by the observations of our team and partners who assist with programming and data collection in the communities. This report is the culmination that weaves together the richness and breadth of the data to give a deeper insight into the lives of adolescent girls across Sierra Leone.

The purpose of this report

This report was born out of a recognition that all of this rich data is available and should be shared with the world, particularly given the relative rarity of girls' voices being foregrounded in the Sierra Leonean context. It presents an opportunity for a 'state of the nation' summary about the lives of girls who are often most marginalised in Sierra Leone, and the findings are grounded in what girls themselves and their mentors are telling us about their lives.

The availability of this nuanced data and verbatim accounts has enabled the report to go beyond the simplified or binary narratives often presented about girls, to present the realities of their lives, in their words. We hope this provides deep insight into their experiences and what lies behind these, as well as the possibilities for positive change.

FROM GIRLS CIRCLES TO GIRLS CIRCLES COLLECTIVES

2020 JANUARY TO APRIL

Planning Girls' Circles with partners, communities, mentors and girls

2020 APRIL TO DECEMBER

Girls' Circles adapts to COVID-19. Kara Kura Konection and Kompin is created and aired, and girls meet with mentors in small groups.

2021 JANUARY TO JUNE

Full implementation of Girls' Circles. Mentors and girls meet in their girl-only spaces twice a week to listen to the radio show, explore the themes, and strengthen their life skills, in spirit of solidarity and joy.

2021 JUNE AND BEYOND

Listening, dreaming and planning for Girls' Circles Collectives.

Methodology

The core source material for this report are the findings from a knowledge, attitude, and practice baseline survey with 2,239 girls (aged 13 to 19 years old) across six districts of Sierra Leone, undertaken in October 2020³. Alongside this, we have also referred to a mentor survey conducted in July 2020 and mentors' reflection reports from June to November 2020. During this time, between 250 and 500 mentors provided feedback to Purposeful via a phone application called KoBoCollect⁴ on a weekly, and later, monthly basis. We also held and documented debriefs from the baseline data collection teams during their time in the field, as well hosting monthly reflections with the Purposeful staff working on this project.

It is worth noting that the majority of girls interviewed in the baseline study (84%) had some prior exposure to the Kara Kura Konection and Kompin radio drama and talk show and/or were meeting with mentors in small groups, which may have primed or skewed some of their answers. For example, it is likely that some of the more damaging norms and experiences may have been starker if the research had been undertaken before any exposure to this content⁵.

With support from UNICEF, Purposeful also conducted a U-Report poll⁶ in August 2020 to understand wider community exposure and impact of the radio drama and talk show. U-Reporters in Sierra Leone are predominantly male and aged between 20 to 30 years old. Most U-Reporters are based in the Northern Province (36,125), followed by Western Area (31,972), Southern Province (28,492) and Eastern Province (11,145). 787 people replied to the first poll question, with the response rate dropping off before the poll concluded, which is common for U-Report polls. The information collected is also reflected in this report and provides insight into how the wider community are experiencing Kara Kura Konection and Kompin.

Karo Kura Kompin and Karo Kura Konection

As a media and arts platform designed to spark a national conversation in Sierra Leone, Karo Kura Kompin and Karo Kura Konection are broadcast across the country 70 times a week, reaching over approximately 500,000 people, modelling new beliefs and behaviours at scale, and opening up possibilities for new ways of being for girls and young women.

The characters in Karo Kura Kompin, the weekly radio drama, have quickly become national treasures as their storylines speak to the deep challenges that girls face including early marriage and sexual violence, while also showing the power and possibility of girl-led change. Central to the stories are friendship and solidarity, changing beliefs and possibilities.

Karo Kura Konection, the weekly talk show that accompanies the series, invites discussion about the themes in the radio drama and broader cultural conversation – a space for questions and connecting the experiences of girls across Sierra Leone, a space for dreaming and overcoming, music, joy, and laughter.



The lived reality for girls

The Girls' Circles programme has focussed on the most marginalised girls in Sierra Leone. The lives of this cohort of girls are characterised by multiple and intersecting hardships.

Girls get pregnant because of poverty, and they find food for their parents that make men seize advantage of them because of poverty and they don't have anybody to give them money. The only thing they can do is to give themselves to men so that what they want, the men give them.

-MENTOR (AGE 20), BONTHE

Why [do] parents send their girl child in search of food, instead of them (parents)?

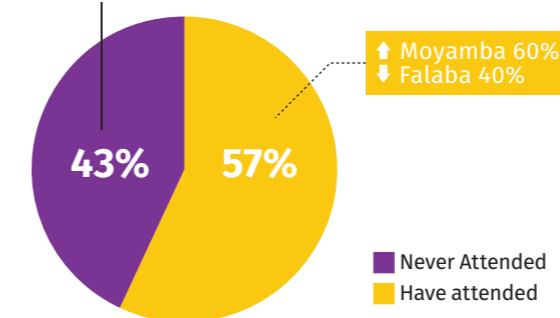
-MENTOR (AGE 20), BONTHE WHO SUBMITTED THIS QUESTION ON BEHALF OF A 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL FROM HER GIRLS' CIRCLE.

Lack of education or leaving school early

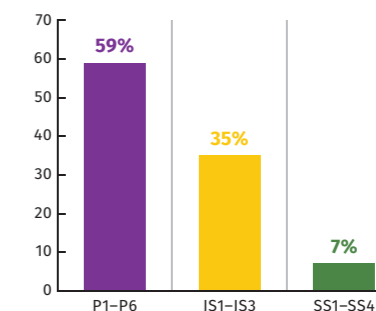
43% of the girls interviewed have never been to school, rising to 72% in the Falaba district. Whilst education rates remain bleak in Sierra Leone, particularly for girls, this reminds us that we are focussed on a particularly vulnerable cohort. UNICEF⁷ estimates that 18% of all Sierra Leonean primary aged children are out of school, a high but comparatively lower number. Of those who have been to school, only 7% made it to senior secondary level, with 59% dropping out or being pushed out at one of the primary grades, and 35% leaving during junior secondary level.

What is girls' education level?

43% of girls interviewed have never attended school



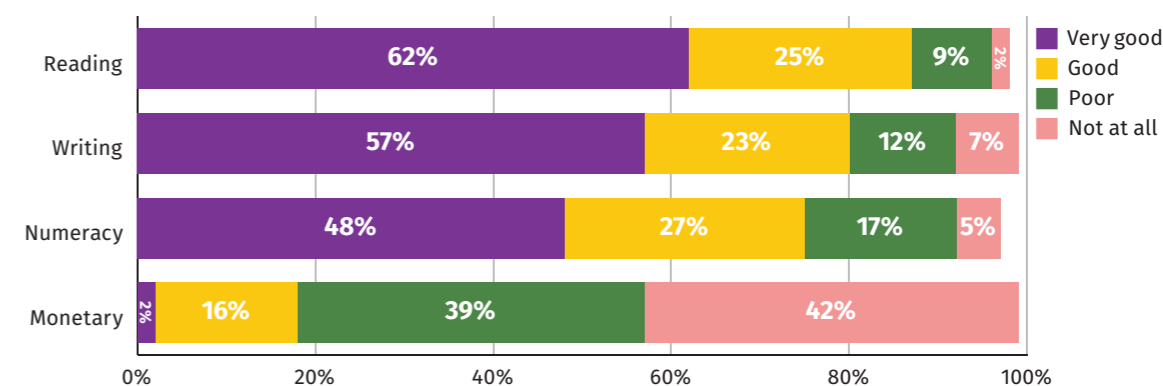
Those that have been to school (n=1287), the last grade they completed



Limited hard skills

Given low formal education levels, it is perhaps unsurprising that girls profess to have low skill levels in literacy and numeracy, with 62% of girls saying they cannot read at all and 57% saying they cannot write at all. There is a strong correlation between girls' composite skill levels (across the four areas of reading, writing, numeracy, and monetary skills) and having ever attended school. This lack of skills was emphasised by the baseline enumerators in Moyamba who said, "they need literacy, [they have] no basic reading or writing skills and no idea about savings or entrepreneurship". This clearly establishes a challenging economic context for girls.

What literacy and numeracy skills do girls say they have?



Girls are often highly commoditised by powerholders around them, particularly parents

Due to the challenging circumstances that families find themselves in, girls are treated as a potential source of income, whether through working for parents, through their bodies, and/or marriage, potentially with an associated dowry, or simply enabling families to 'divest' themselves of the financial burden they might see girls as representing. This manifests in multiple ways and can be seen very clearly when mentors report the challenge of convening girls for their Girls' Circles because some are farming while others are doing chores or trading and selling for their parents. We also heard reports of parents and husbands trying to stop girls attending the Girls' Circles because there was no immediate material gain from it.

“ I wish parents would listen to this programme because they are the cause of the problems we girls face. Some parents don't give duties to their boys to perform, they prefer to give to their girls and that's why we the girls face many challenges on the streets and in communities. –MENTOR (AGE 20), FALABA

“ More girls are absenting from the programme because of family responsibilities and domestic duties. –MENTOR (AGE 19), MOYAMBA

The ubiquity of transactional sex

Almost one in five girls (19%), without any prompting, without any prompting, explicitly stated that sex in exchange of money, goods or services is a reason to have sex. Given the situation for girls, it is perhaps unsurprising how commonplace transactional sex is, often perceived as their only means of extracting value from themselves. Obviously, a big piece of the story involves asking why – at a cultural level and from the 'demand' perspective of men – transactional sex is so commonplace and why poor boys find themselves less frequently in this position. This is explored later in the report, as what is tragically striking from the various data sources, is not only how common it is but how few alternatives girls perceive for themselves.

“ How can you be responsible for your family without lie down for man? –MENTOR (AGE 19), FALABA WHO SUBMITTED THIS QUESTION ON BEHALF OF A 16 YEAR OLD GIRL FROM HER GIRLS' CIRCLE.

High levels of teen pregnancy

Also striking, are the incredibly high rates of teen pregnancy amongst girls interviewed. Though not of course the exclusive driver, the ubiquity of transactional sex (from more to less explicit) provides one clear pathway to this. 57% of all girls interviewed have at least one child and this rises to 64% of girls when we look at the 15 – 19 age group. When undertaking the survey in Bonthe, interviewers observed that many of the girls interviewed were lactating mothers, some as young as 13 years old. While in Moyamba, interviewers observed on one day of data collection that 90% of the girls they spoke to were mothers. The fact that 74% of girls say they do not want children or more children in the next two years, exposes the significant hardship of this situation for girls. What's more, until March 2020, the law prevented pregnant girls from attending school and taking national exams, furthering the cycle of hardships.

This data compares strikingly with the 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) findings, which found that 21% of girls aged 15 – 19 years old, had started child-bearing (albeit higher in rural areas: 29% versus 14% in urban areas). The biggest difference in the data is that our survey focuses only on out-of-school girls versus a representative cohort for DHS. However, this simply serves to underline the particularly challenging context for girls unable to continue school into their teens, and the ubiquity of the pathway to motherhood for these girls.

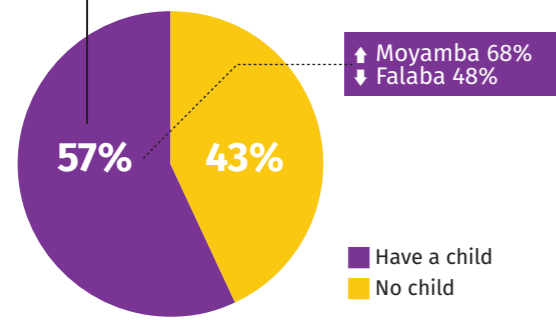


“ Most of the men nowadays, they are in the habit of that, which say nothing goes for nothing – when they give, they must receive from you in return. –MENTOR (AGE 19), MOYAMBA

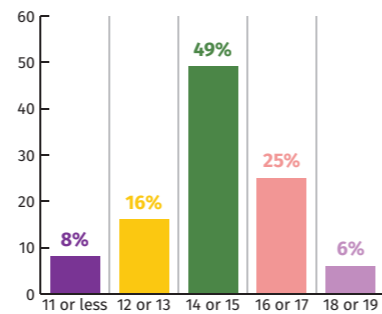
“ Karo Kura Konection makes me feel differently on how to treat a girl child, and also make me realise that girl child are not sex toy. –MALE, U-REPORT, AUGUST 2020

Do the girls have children? What age are they when they have their first child?

57% of girls interviewed have a child or children



On average, girls were 14.76 years when they had their first child



The reality of child marriage.

Almost one in three girls (32%) surveyed in the baseline are currently married or cohabiting, which increases to 36% if the lockdoor arrangement (similar to an engagement) is included. This includes 8% in polygamous marriages, rising to 24% in Falaba. The average age of marriage is 14.6 years old. We can see from the data that while we cannot decouple child marriage from teen pregnancy, pregnancy rates are significantly higher than rates of reported child marriage. This reflects what we have seen in previous research⁸ in Sierra Leone, specifically that the major issue facing teen girls is pregnancy, and marriages or related arrangements are often a response to this. While further qualitative research would be needed to understand the nature of these marriages, we can assume from the extensive literature⁹ that they rarely represent happy or balanced partnerships for girls. And yet, it is equally not obvious that an unmarried teen mother is necessarily in a better position than a married one.

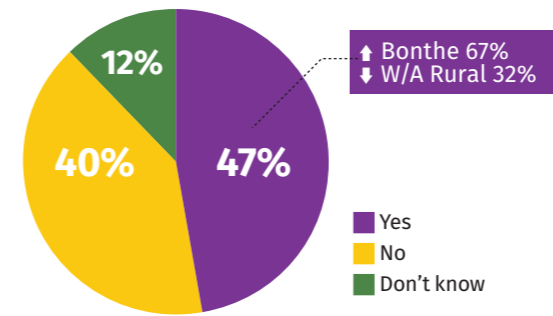
Again, the findings from our baseline survey differ from the DHS 2019 study, which found that 13.9% of girls aged 15-19 years old are married or cohabiting. Once more, this simply serves to underline the specific and limited options available to girls out of school.

In this context of commoditisation and dehumanisation, violence is an everyday occurrence

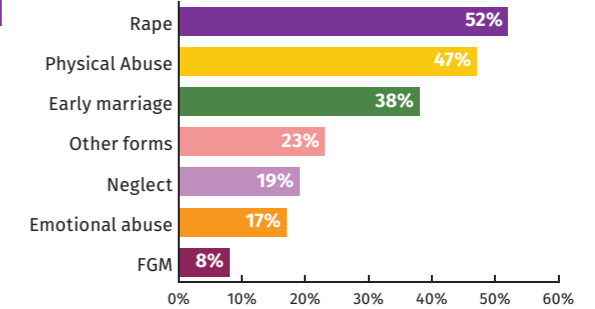
Girls are subjected to significant and varied forms of violence, with rape extremely commonplace. According to the baseline survey, one in four girls (25%) say that girls experience rape as a form of violence in their community. Given that rape is universally under-reported, the true extent of this may be much higher. Indeed, rape was mentioned by almost all (92%) of the girls surveyed in Bonthe district as a type of violence that girls experience where they live.

Do any girls in your community experience any violence?

Observation from data collection – the word violence doesn't resonate with girls



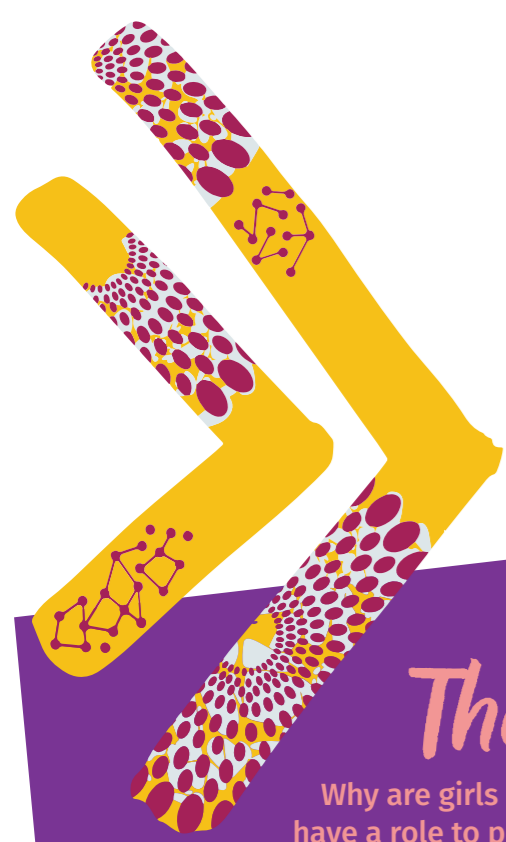
What types of violence? (n=1052)



What is striking is not just the lived experience of violence, but just how normalised and everyday it is. Indeed, we see in the baseline survey that 60% of girls agree that 'a woman should accept violence in the home to keep the family together'. What's more, many girls struggled to identify violence as a concept when surveyed, requiring interviewers to describe it in more tangible detail, such as a "bad, bad thing". Violence is simply part of everyday life.

“Most of the adolescent girls today are being [subjected to] violence, rape and do such thing to them as if they are not a human being.
-MENTOR (AGE 17), KARENE

“What we see as violence, they see as normal. They are forced to succumb to violence. Parents even warned that if she leaves her marriage, they will beat her; so she just accepts it.
-BASELINE ENUMERATOR



The Context

Why are girls in this situation? Whilst structural factors, particularly poverty, have a role to play, none of the issues highlighted in the last section impact boys to the same extent as girls. Instead, it is gendered poverty that constrains the options that girls can imagine and access for themselves, or that others in society can imagine and access for them.

The power of patriarchy

The hardships faced by the Girls' Circles girls, reflect not only a life lived at the intersection of poverty, chaos (civil war, Ebola, now COVID-19) and youth, but overlaid by patriarchal oppression – the universe of structural, political, and economic violence against women and girls. Patriarchy manifests in a wide range of oppressive norms and structures around girls: low numbers of female decision makers at all levels of government and community; patrilineal property rights; payment of a dowry in customary marriages; contradictory laws around early marriage; the continuation of polygamy within certain communities; and paid work characterised as a male domain, while demands for unpaid care work for girls are high. Power at home rests with the male head of the household, while girls are kept away from and given no power in community spaces. These narratives are policed by society at large but also internalised by girls themselves.



Because they feel that woman should not talk where men talk.

–MENTOR (AGE 18), BONTHE



In girls' lived experience, patriarchy shows up as desired control of girls' freedom, opportunities, and sexuality. The cultural norms of control affect the choices a girl is offered and, even more foundationally, the choices she can imagine for herself. Cultural narratives about control make it more appealing for families, parents, and communities to close off options for girls, and are more frightening for them to leave open. Ultimately, they affect the choices a girl can envisage for herself, creating not just an ambivalence but a fatalism about a highly restricted set of normatively prescribed pathways. In this context, cultural narratives of control affect the concrete choices that are on offer for girls in their lived experience.

The limited choices that girls can imagine

A restricted set of dominant narratives cast girls as future wives and then mothers, with few other models available

This culture of control defines girls' and women's identities in relation to others (men) in society, with a conceptual gap around positive identity markers for girls and women. Normative expectations of value extraction follow a girl working for her own family, to working for a husband's family, to childbearing. This restricts what she can imagine for her future to the spaces of childbearing and rearing, while also providing a strong justification for keeping her away from formal education.

This pathway, casting girls as future wives and then mothers, is so culturally cherished because it represents control over girls' burgeoning sexuality that is deeply feared by community members, especially in its most visible form, teen pregnancy. Marriage represents a way of 'sanctifying' pregnancy and making it 'clean'. The ideal normative path is extremely narrow, specifically from marriage to pregnancy with a culture of shame around unmarried, especially teenage mothers. According to the baseline report, 46% of girls agree that it is ok to throw a pregnant daughter out of the home (45% disagree). There is also relatively high awareness around the legal age for consensual sex with 55% claiming awareness, of which 85% believe the legal age is 18 or over (indeed it is 18 years old). Whilst no doubt a well-meaning law, it is easy to see how the feeling of acting in contravention with the law could represent another source of shame, in addition to deviation from cultural expectations.

And yet, control of girls is clearly not absolute, particularly reflected in the high (unmarried) teen pregnancy numbers. As we've seen in past research, the cataclysmic shifts of poverty, war, Ebola, and now COVID-19, have seen behaviour decoupled to some degree from socially normative beliefs. In this context, basic survival strategies trump all else, hence the ubiquity of transactional sex where girls are often side-lined from other sufficient income generating activity. The desire to regulate social life remains, but the means to do so is more limited. The extreme misalignment of behaviour and beliefs mean that cultural norms have already become unstuck, which could present a future opportunity, a 'chink in the armour' to drive change for girls. Right now, however, we see this perceived loss of control driving a desire amongst parents and communities to regain control of girls' lives where they can, even if this is within a limited scope.

Education can represent a socially sanctioned alternative path for girls.

However, this leads to a vicious cycle where those girls who have had to drop out of school become pariahs, disrespected by society, and further kept away from assets. This was most vividly brought to life by community leaders and partners' field officers often assuming that our Girls' Circles programmes are for in-school girls and recruiting accordingly. Though it should also be noted that once clarified to communities that the programme is for out-of-school girls, it is fully embraced. This feels vital, since the girls in our programme tell us there is typically nothing on offer for out-of-school girls.

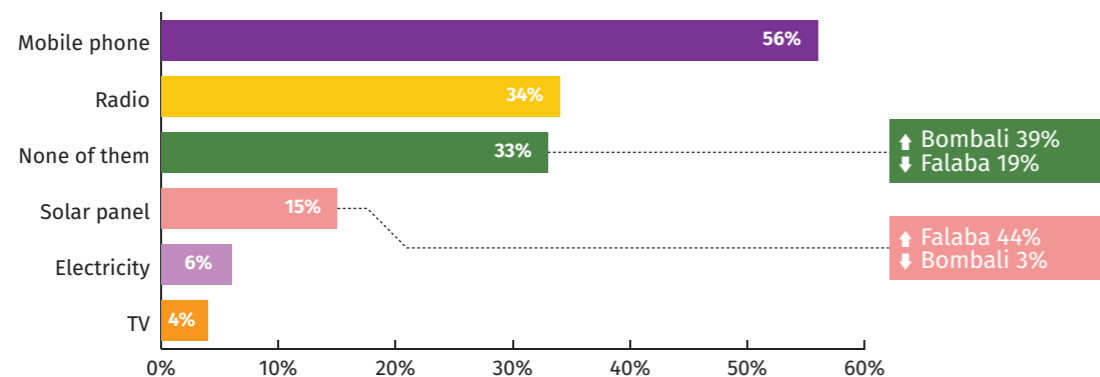
Even where education is presented as an alternative pathway, there are few models for what happens afterwards. It doesn't always represent an alternative long-term vision. We can see this from the preceding section, where girls struggle to work out how they could earn money without the involvement of a man. This may also reflect the limited impact of education for girls – in the survey questions about literacy, the most common response in terms of languages read is 'none' (67%), but since a relatively smaller proportion (43%) of girls have never attended school, this suggests that even attendance at some form of school does not necessarily correlate to positive learning outcomes.

The limited choices that girls can access

Patriarchal norms intersect with poverty, where there is already so little to go round, distancing girls from assets and resources.

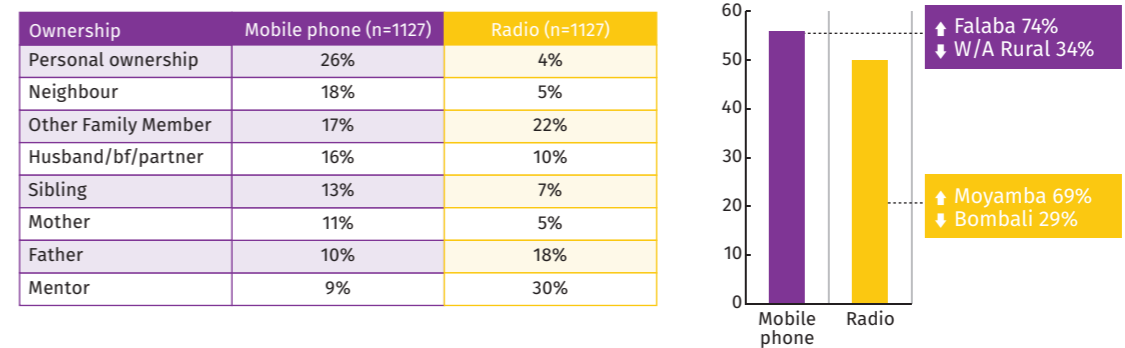
We see that families of poor girls often have limited household access to physical and financial assets. 33% of girls in the baseline survey told us that their home is without mobile phone, radio, solar panel, electricity, or TV. The numbers with TV, electricity or solar panel are limited.

What assets are in their houses?



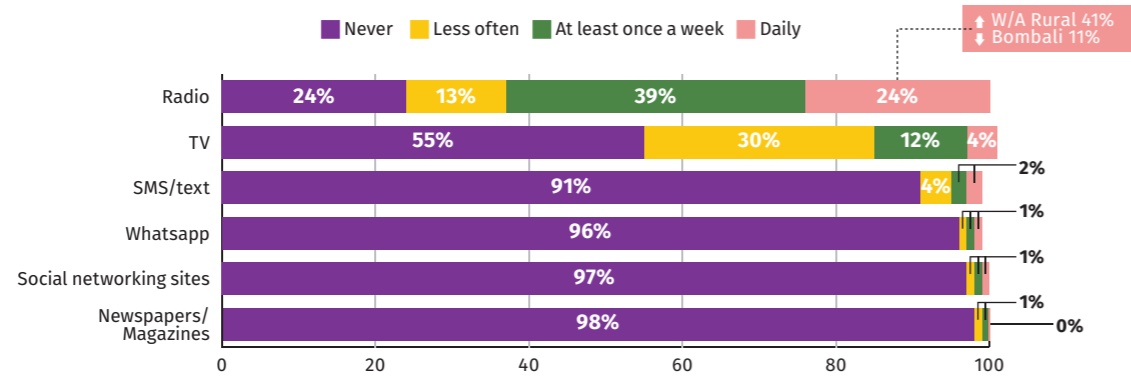
It is not obvious that asset provision would change girls' access to these assets while patriarchy persists, as the baseline survey also shows us that even if households have assets, patriarchy means they are typically controlled by another power-holder and not in the hands of girls themselves. This is just one example of the concrete impact of patriarchal control on girls' lives. We heard from mentors that they often felt more respected in the community from having a phone, but that mentees – and indeed other community members – question the provision of a mobile phone to mentors, reminding us of the scarcity of these assets amongst girls.

Do you have regular access to a mobile phone or radio?



The direct impact of this lack of access to assets and resources is that girls' access to a variety of different media types is severely constrained, with radio the only channel to which girls have significant access. A quarter of girls (24%) say they listen to the radio daily, and 39% of girls say that they listen to the radio at least once a week. By comparison, just 4% of girls watch TV every day and 12% at least once a week. Few girls access any of the other four other channels once a week and the vast majority almost never – SMS (91%), WhatsApp (96%), social networking sites (97%) and newspapers/ magazines (98%). This establishes a severely limited informational ecosystem for these girls, which has the effect of limiting their world or the opportunity to be exposed to choices or other possibilities.

How often do girls watch, listen to or use different media types?



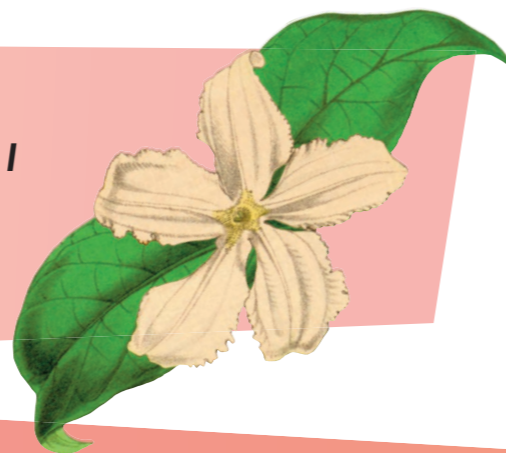
Patriarchy constrains girls' access to social networks and social capital.

Here we see norms of control coming to life, with girls discouraged from meeting other girls, or not allowed out by family due to demands at home with chores or paid work. They often face issues around the lack of safe spaces to meet, as often seemingly neutral or community spaces are dominated by boys and power-holders. This is evidenced by the struggles experienced in convening girls, both for safe space sessions and undertaking the baseline questionnaire. In the June mentor's report, 37% of mentors reported the challenges of finding places to meet. This is exacerbated during the rainy season when roads are bad, outside informal meeting places are no longer practical, and girls lack access to transport. For girls already out of school and without regular contact with their peers, this lack of access to social networks is particularly damaging.

Combined, lack of resources and social capital often result in limited access to informational assets.

Girls lack practical information about a huge range of issues about their bodies, their health and most recently, about COVID-19. According to the baseline survey, 43% did not know about menstruation before they got their period. Girls also often lack any power analysis to explain their situation, instead agreeing with a whole host of norms around patriarchal control. Whilst we should not necessarily expect teenagers to hold this power analysis spontaneously, in Sierra Leone or elsewhere, the extent to which girls absorb damaging norms suggests a clear need for political education.

“By listening this radio programme, I have correct my mistake.”
 –GIRL (AGE 15), MOYAMBA



In Summary

For girls, this culture of control leads to highly limited choices that they can imagine for themselves, given the restricted set of culturally normative pathways for women, as well as limitations on the choices they can actually access due to lack of resources and opportunities. This last section evidences a culture of control and the manifestations of a highly circumscribed lived reality for girls with limited access to education, lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills, teen pregnancy, child marriage, and everyday violence.

Yet, amid all this, there is an insidious narrative that denies or neglects this reality and instead holds that girls *are* making active choices, and that so often places blame for a girl's situation on her own shoulders. This is sometimes reflected in the language used by mentors, and even by girls themselves.

This is a common strategy used against (and sometimes internalised by) the most marginalised in many different contexts around the world, and over time, as a way to maintain and justify the status quo and avoid conceding resources and power. It leads to a double blow for girls – all the hardships described in this report, with the added feelings of guilt and shame from having seemingly chosen to deviate. And, most perniciously, it serves to further justify language and actions of 'control' over girls, by parents, elders, and society at large.

“This information is of much importance for girls some of us are foolish for money and are not capable or responsible for ourselves, but this programme will help us girls to stop misusing ourselves by not sleeping with strange men.”
 – MENTOR (AGE 19), MOYAMBA

“The most important thing the girls learned, is that they should not allow men to destroy their future for little money and they also learned that that they should mingle with good friends that well help them protect their lives lead them to good future.”
 –MENTOR (AGE 24), FALABA



The Possibilities

Whilst it is true that girls are regularly choosing from a palette of dehumanising options for their everyday lives and from a position of no or minimal power, it is not the case that everything is done to girls or that we should see girls as victims.

This is often a common alternative narrative presented about girls and could be an easy conclusion to draw if we don't incorporate a recognition of girls' agency and inner power. Many campaigns that focus on adolescent girls, although well-meaning, can cast girls as passive victims in need of help and protection. The language of 'protection' is even reflected by mentors, with 85 instances of "protect" or "protection" in the responses to the mentor survey in July 2020. Mentors often see themselves as protecting girls, either in relation to 'bad people' in society (often boys or men), or against bad events that could befall them, especially early pregnancy.

A simplistic counter-narrative of protection, rather than control for girls, doesn't reflect the reality of girls' potential power, strength, and resilience, and the fact that when opportunities are presented to girls, they take action. Girls are already primed to be the agents of change over their own lives.



Why did you choose to become a mentor?

To keep girls safe from bad boys in our society.

–MENTOR (AGE 19), WESTERN AREA RURAL



Even if I get stressed at home, I get joy and laugh a lot when I go to the Girls' Circle.

–GIRL (AGE 18), KARENE

A 'victimising' or 'protective' narrative also obscures the positivity that many girls profess and manifest

One notable feature of the debriefs with Purposeful staff was the joy and fun that is reported from the Girls' Circles and even the baseline survey sessions.



The skill of dancing. My girls always ask me to dance for them and it makes them feel good and I also tell them stories that makes the circle so interesting, and they seem to like it according to their confession.

–MENTOR (AGE 19), KARENE

We see the tangible extent to which girls transcend a lack of hard skills for their livelihoods

This is most strikingly shown in their strong money skills – despite poor reading, writing, and numeracy – with over 80% saying they have good or very good money skills and that they are often in some sort of paid work or trading (51%). And yet, in a culture of patriarchal control, the concept of transferable skills – that business or money-handling skills equate to numeracy – has not been communicated to girls. Equally, some of the mentors do recognise the skills they have (like hairdressing or mechanics) that they could pass onto mentees.

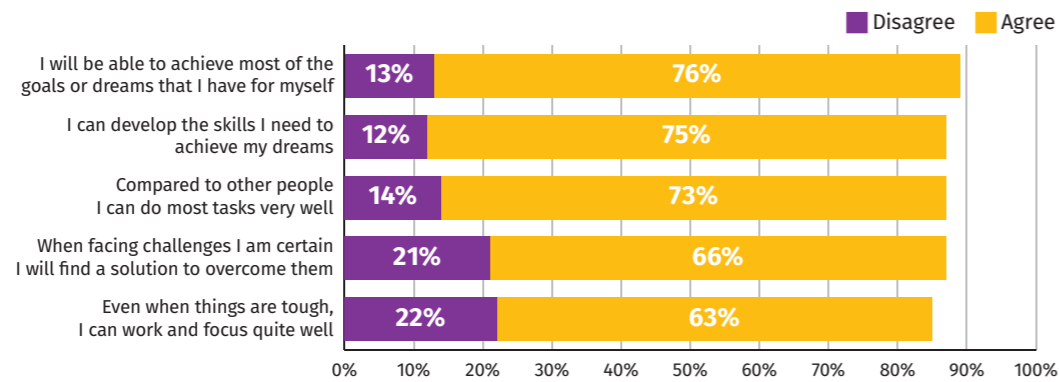
We might also wonder whether, in certain circumstances, early pregnancy may be somewhat more actively chosen by girls as a way to improve their status, rather than exclusively something done to girls through transactional sex, rape, or forced marriage. This is suggested by answers to the question; 'Why do girls have sex?', with 46% of girls stating pregnancy, compared to 28% for pleasure and 19% in exchange for food and money. This is also supported by the testimonies of Purposeful staff on the ground. It should not be overstated, since the priority should still be to interrogate the context which means that early pregnancy is one of the only status-improving options felt to be on offer to girls, but the extent to which early pregnancy is actively chosen, despite the circumscribed context, feels an important question to ask as we aim for a more nuanced understanding of girls' lives than one that simply sees a range of bad things being done to them.



Girls' power and potential also shows up in their professed self-worth

Girls and mentors also feed back more favourably than we might expect on the status of girls, with only 30% agreeing that a boy child is preferable to a girl, despite the majority agreeing with other gendered norms, and 54% believe that community elders listen to girls' views when making community decisions. We need to acknowledge there might be bias in the answers to these questions, based on the expectations of what interviewers want to hear (and the prior exposure many girls will have had to programme content), but even if answers are exaggerated, the emphasis is clear – girls believe they should have a seat at the table, and many have the foundational beliefs in place to take control of their own lives when opportunities present themselves.

Attitudes to self-confidence



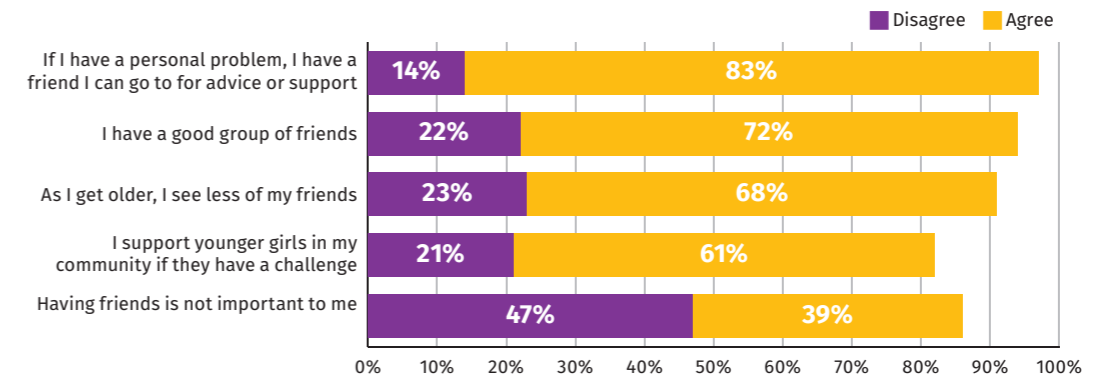
Girls support other girls

Our data shines a light on a universe of girls supporting each other with problems – 83% say they have a friend they can go to for advice or support and 72% say they have a good group of friends. This shows that girls are already helping and supporting each other, which acts as a powerful retort to the narrative that girls are in need of external protection.

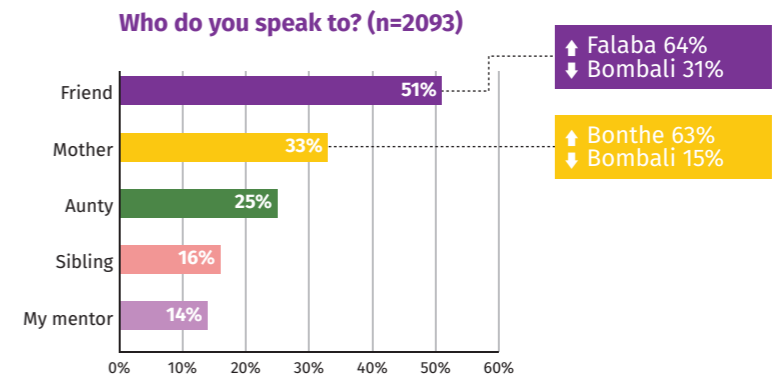
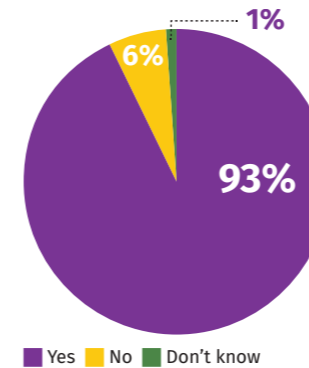
We also heard about mentors using their stipend to support mentees in various ways, and solidarity in action, particularly with food and drink at meetings, as well as setting up small businesses and girl-led cooperatives.

The data also shows us that girls are much more comfortable speaking up with other girls (88%) than in broader community spaces (just 34% are not anxious or nervous about this), reminding us that the issue is, of course, not their voice, power, or agency per se, but how it is circumscribed by social context. This also shows that whilst solidarity amongst girls is a powerful organic force, this can be boosted by creating safe girl-only spaces. And this is especially vital in a context where limited resources, in conjunction with community power dynamics, make it hard for girls to physically access space to be together.

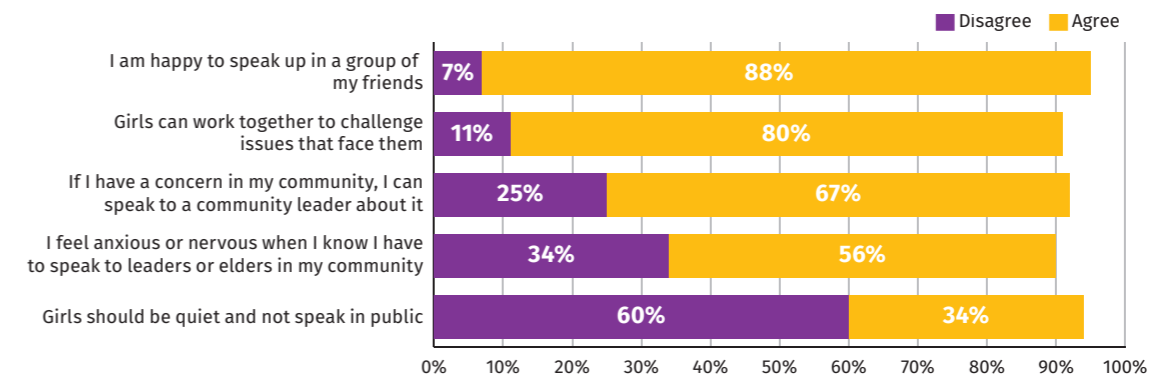
Attitudes to friendship



Do girls have someone to speak to if they need advice?



Attitudes to voice and solidarity



The impact of the Girls' Circles provides a fantastic case study of the power of opening up new possibilities for girls

In a short space of time, the programme has had a transformational impact. We see this particularly through mentors' weekly feedback, as well as directly from the girls themselves in the baseline survey where three-quarters (76%) of the girls who have listened to the radio drama say the storyline has made them think or behave differently.

Girls in the programme are demonstrating greater understanding and analysis of their situation

They are showing that narratives and beliefs are not fixed but socially imposed, and that girls' position in their community is often compromised by those around them. This understanding represents a strong basis for imagining alternative futures, knowing that the current situation is just one construction of reality, rather than a 'natural' state of affairs, and therefore that it doesn't have to be this way.

“ Beliefs can be changed because it's not natural. It is what people think about us... Gender roles are just roles society gives to us based on our sex. There's no harm climbing tree as a girl or doing domestic works as boys. Being raped, pregnant or dropped out of school doesn't mean we are useless in the community or society. There's more to our lives if we are ready to work hard and be as strong as Mariatu.

– Mentor (age 23), Bombali referring to a character in the radio drama Karo Kura Kumpin.

“ I wish parents would listen to this programme, because they are the cause of the problems we girls face, some parents don't give duties to their boys to perform. They prefer to give to their girls, that's why we the girls face many challenges on the streets and in communities.

–Mentor (age 20), Falaba

“ I feel so much excited about the radio show because it makes adolescent girls in my community to be serious and to be bold.

–Mentor (age 24), Karene

“ It is very relevant because we learned many things. 1 – some people will say girls are weak but due to radio show we learned that girls are not weak, but we are strong. 2 – we also learned that girls are smart just like boys. 3 – we also learned that we should also have control over our bodies as girls. 4 – we also learned that we should not have sex without condoms or contraceptives.

–Mentor (age 19), Karene

“ It's quite important because rape and sexual penetration has been the order of the day in our communities. So, it's relevant for we the girls to be aware about it and take proactive measures for we not to be a victim.

–Mentor (age 19), Bombali

“ It has changed my life and now a man will not take advantage of me. Am thinking of going back to school, and when any bad thing happens to me, I will report to my mentor.

–Girl (age 18), Bonthe

“ I used to feel bad about myself when I dropped out of school because of teenage pregnancy, but with the Karo Kura I was able to love myself again and move on.

–Girl (age 18), Western Area Rural

“ I don't have the facilities to listen to radio before but now every week I have the opportunity to listen to radio and I believe I will not do early married in my life if I have the power.

–Girl (age 13), Karene

“ We have a choice to choose what we want and won't allow the men to abuse us.
–Girl (age 19), Karene

“ Before this time, my knowledge of football and bike riding was for men but now I am riding it because of what I have learned from the radio and also now I know that I can do what a man can do.
–Girl (age 18), Bombali

“ Preventing teenage pregnancy, how men use resources to lure girls.
–Girl (age 18), Bombali

“ In Karene, one girl who was so bold, told us; Why you guys haven't come earlier than now, for me, I have already lost my hope. I don't know if I can make it.
She has three children, and since attending the programme she is learning and holding others to account.

Girls show a marked change in adherence to patriarchal norms. For example, 58% of those exposed to the radio drama say women should accept violence in the home versus the 70% girls surveyed who had not listened to it. Those who have met a mentor are more likely to agree that household chores should be shared, (40% compared to 29%) and similarly for those girls who have heard the radio drama (39% compared to 26%).

With this new understanding of the role of power-holders in their lives, some girls on the programme have been raising their voices, challenging early marriage or school drop-out

With a renewed confidence to speak up to parents or husbands, this even extends to greater confidence around community elders. Girls who have met a mentor (70% compared to 56%) or have listened to the radio drama (69% against 55%) are more likely to agree that girls could talk to community leaders about their concerns.



“ The parents want to force her to early married but she refused 16 years.
Mentor (age 24), Bombali

“ 18 year, her husband says that the girl should not go to the Girls' Circles. The girl say no her husband take her to her parents so her parents decided to return her back to school.
Mentor (age 23), Karene

“ I learn that early marriage is not really really good for us, and I will not do early marriage at all no matter what.
Girl (age 13), Karene

“ I now know my rights concerning early marriage. I won't allow my parents to force me to go into marriage.
Girl (age 13), Western Area Rural

Girls have increased knowledge and understanding around their bodies. Girls who already had some exposure to Girls' Circles at the time of interview, through meeting with a mentor or listening to the radio drama, are more likely to have heard of family planning and menstruation. In the baseline survey, some girls talk about adopting better self-care practices, knowing how to space their children, protect themselves from disease and visiting the health clinic if they are pregnant.

“ I should have been pregnant if not for the programme. Now I focus on my business and prevent myself from getting pregnant.
–Girl (age 19), Falaba

“ Yes, I was thinking of giving birth fast fast but because of what I learned am going to give space to my children now.
–Girl (age 16), Karene

“ Before the programme, I was using contraceptives, but my parents said contraceptives are only used by prostitutes and I should remove it, and I did, which later led me to pregnancy. But I have now learned that it is so good to use contraceptives.

—Girl (age 16), Karene

There are powerful material impacts on girls' lives

We see this particularly among mentors and/or mentees who have started collectives and small businesses. We know that when you give assets to a girl or woman, that everyone benefits, and we see this clearly as some mentors set up collectives and small businesses with the girls in the Girls' Circles, using their stipends (a small monthly payment of approximately £35 per month) as start-up capital. Mentors are also using their stipend to return to school, enrol in vocational skills training, and to begin teacher training courses.

Many impacts are attributable to the radio show content

Mentors report that it is highly relevant to the girls in their clubs, and this is echoed by girls themselves in the baseline survey. Mentors and girls alike, resonate with the characters and storylines, as for many, it is their daily lived experience.

“ What they talked about on the radio programme is exactly what some of the girls go through, but with the radio programme now they now knows what to do when they face problem like this, especially those that haven't been through this before.

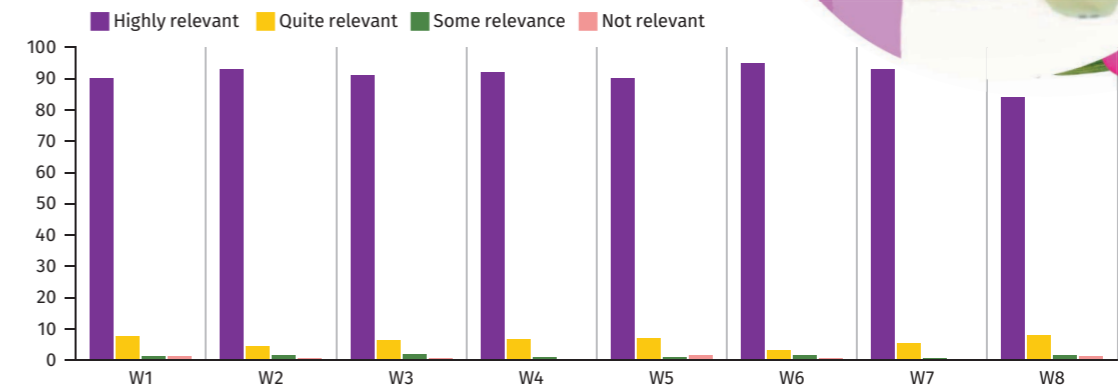
—Mentor (age 23), Bombali

“ In my opinion, I really love Mariatu because I have the same story as Mariatu – all the pain and sorrow Mariatu is going through I have been going through like her. I always pity for Mariatu most times I feel like crying for her. May God continue to guide and protect her for safe delivery. I have always seen myself inside Mariatu, she is my best character in the drama.

—Mentor (age 22), Bombali



Weekly September / October relevance ratings.



“ Because Lucy educate them and show them how to behave in the society and how to love each other and care for others.

—Mentor (age 20), Bonthe

“ I have learned from Mariatu that I should avoid men and not collect gifts. I should not copy bad things from friends and avoid having sex with men.

—Girl (age 16), Bombali

“ I used to feel bad about myself when I dropped out of school because of teenage pregnancy, but with the Karo Kura I was able to love myself again and move on.

—Girl (age 18), Western Area Rural

Impacts are driven by girls' experiences of being in spaces where power relations are more equal, and they are encouraged to speak up

The form of the space is as important as the content. The key evidence here is the reporting back by the mentors of questions and even complaints, often even from very young girls in the group.

“ I now have the bold mind to talk to people around me I was ashamed to speak in public. Now I have the confidence.

—Girl (age 18), Karene

We can learn from the role of the mentors themselves, who express confidence in their roles and are articulating the power they see in themselves. Often simply through being assigned the role of mentor and drawing credibility from understanding the experiences of girls at scale, they are affirming their right to speak up in community spaces and to various power-holders. A different role has been framed for them and they are quickly and whole-heartedly stepping in. This new term, 'mentor', represents a positive counterpoint to the typical restricted options they have imagined for themselves, and they are demonstrating confidence and belief in what they could do with their lives and, in turn, the power of modelling different options and pathways for girls.

“ Because I want to be included in making decisions in the community, and even the country as a whole.

—Mentor (age 20), Falaba

“ I choose to be a mentor because I want my community to be safe and join the civil society in Sierra Leone.

—Mentor (age 19), Karene

“ Because I act as a role model and speak for girls in terms of any negatively coming towards us girls, and I stand bold enough to face anything.

—Mentor (age 18), Western Area Urban



“ Because most of this, parents don't understand this things so unless we explain to them well so they can understand well.

—Mentor (age 27), Kenema

“ I believe in the saying that a problem discuss is a problem half solved. Keeping quiet about will not change anything...but trying to find cause, effect and solution can help you solve the problem.

—Mentor (age 23), Western Area Urban

Mentors also provide a concrete example of what happens when they are given a tangible asset

This is particularly true of their mobile phones, and we learn through the mentor surveys that they use their phones for accessing information on the internet, connecting with other girls, and saving time and effort on their mentor role. We also commonly hear stories of mentors being more respected in their community and in their homes, due to their role and power that comes with having assets like a phone and a monthly stipend. This is indicative of the choices that girls can then access and imagine, where access to tangible assets opens up new possibilities.

“ It helps us to get information, it helps us to know each other in our different communities, it helps us to send information, and also communication amongst we the mentors and the head for the GC foundation. It makes work easier for we the mentors and the donors. It also helps us to pass on information to girls even if we don't listen to radio, but we will understand from the phone, so it has helped us in various ways and very important to us.

—Mentor (age 24), Western Area Rural

It all serves as a powerful reminder that girls have what they need to change their situations themselves – they take action when given new visions, space, opportunities and assets. It simply reaffirms the importance of opening up new options that girls can imagine and access, while respecting girls as the key agents of change over their own lives.



Conclusions and moving forward

The lives of the girls reached through the Girls' Circles programme are characterised by multiple hardships, driven by gendered poverty. Yet when girls are able to imagine and access new options, they take action, primed to be agents of change over their own lives. The findings from just six months in 2020, provide compelling evidence of the impact of Girls' Circles with mentors and mentees alike, and during 2021, we continue to see this as they come together in sisterhood and solidarity into Girls Circles' Collectives.

Neither of the dominant current narratives that are used to frame girls' lives adequately reflect their lived realities: The familiar narrative and language of choice and blame from the world of neo-liberalism that puts the onus on girls themselves for making bad choices, justifying behaviours that seek to control girls; or the other narrative that frames things being done entirely to girls, where not enough agency is assumed, justifying behaviours that seek to protect girls rather than recognising their fundamental power.

We need a new narrative and framework to understand girls. Girls' lives are constrained by patriarchy, and more specifically by gendered poverty, but they are primed to change their lives for the better when there is a shift in their ability to access and imagine their own choices.

This sets up two imperatives: The first, to ensure more assets and resources are funnelled to girls so that their tangible range of choices expands; the second, to support girls to imagine different alternatives by showing them that the current status quo is just one construction of reality, not the 'natural' way, and then to help them see new visions that can start to replace outdated and constricted norms. In this way, the strategy is neither to attempt to control or protect girls, but to establish the conditions where they can seize opportunities for themselves and live in their full power.

The Girls' Circles Collectives embody these imperatives, and on this journey, we will listen, learn, share, and always strive to do better, with and for girls.

Notes

1 Girls' Circles was funded by UK Aid under the Support to Adolescent Girls Empowerment in Sierra Leone programme, however the views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

2 Girls' Circles started in May 2020 and ran until June 2021. From July 2021 to September 2021, Purposeful redesigned and operationalised the new Girls' Circles Collectives model, while continuing to support mentors and girls throughout this period.

3 Ethical approval was granted for this study by the Office of the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee, Directorate of Training and Research, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, on 25th September 2020.

4 KoboCollect is the app associated with KoboToolbox - a free and open-source data collect software.

5 Data collection was delayed due to COVID-19.

6 U-report is a free TEXT social monitoring tool for community participation, designed to address issues that the population cares about. SMS polls and alerts are sent out to U-reporters and real-time response information is collected... U-Report relies on volunteer community members serving as U-Reporters on a free entry, free exit basis to provide information on issues in their communities." <https://sierraleone.ureport.in/about/>

7 <https://www.unicef.org/sierraleone/education>

8 Bransky, R. Enoch J. and Long, C. (2017). Child Marriage in Sierra Leone and Guinea. Cultural Roots and Girl Centered Solutions. Purposeful Productions

9 For example, see the Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK) research tracker: https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1561/CRANK_Research_Tracker_Aug_2021.pdf

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Equally, we deeply appreciate the time given to us by each and every girl interviewed, as well as the mentors, female volunteers, and wider community members who provided their invaluable support throughout the data collection.

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Finally, we extend deep gratitude to the Girls' Circles team and wider Purposeful family who supported this report from design to completion - for the nights spent away from home, the hours spent on boats and on the side of roads, the testing of tools, the honesty provided in daily debriefs and for always striving to raise the voices of the girls you meet.

For access to the full technical report of the Girls' Circles Baseline (October 2020) please register your interest via email to info@wearepurposeful.org

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



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