



Making sense of girls empowerment in Sierra Leone: a conversation

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Abstract

This Testify article features a conversation about the emancipatory potentials and pitfalls of girls empowerment as practiced, experienced, and judged by Sierra Leonean activists. We – two scholars and four activists – discussed views on and experiences of girls empowerment approaches that have been interpreted in critical scholarly literature as a form of neoliberal responsabilization. Also within this critical literature, there is often the notion that these approaches may yet create openings for emancipatory agency and counter-conduct. However, it remains unclear whether this happens and to what extent. Our conversation centres activists' views on the academic critique of girls empowerment and raises a number of questions, including: Why do many feminist activists in Sierra Leone embrace girls empowerment approaches? What do they see in them? How do they interpret and practice them? Where do they see potentials and pitfalls? And what is the role of donors?

Keywords Girls empowerment · Activism · Feminism · Donors · Sierra Leone

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Introduction

This Testify article features a conversation about the emancipatory potentials and pitfalls of girls empowerment as practiced, experienced, and judged by Sierra Leonean activists. We discussed views on and experiences of girls empowerment approaches that have been interpreted in critical scholarly literature as a form of neoliberal responsabilization creating “informed powerlessness” (Bessa, 2019) or “pseudo-empowerment” (Menzel, 2019). Also within this critical literature, there is often the notion that these approaches may yet create openings for emancipatory agency and counter-conduct—but it remains unclear whether this happens and to what extent (see e.g. Prügl, 2015, 627; Moeller, 2018, 206–209). Our conversation centres Sierra Leonean activists’ views on the academic critique of girls empowerment and these open questions. In this way, we together explore the meaning of “girls empowerment” in Sierra Leone.

On a more general level, we are convinced that asking and discussing uncomfortable questions like “why do activists embrace something that critical scholars have characterized as neoliberal?”, is a crucial step if we want to be serious about decolonial (un)learning. Considering and understanding why concepts, models, and activities such as girls empowerment (or “resilience” to name another example, see Hajir, Clarke-Habibi, and Kurian 2021) are viewed, understood, and used/practiced differently depending on one’s experiences, material opportunities, and positionality at large may sometimes unsettle progressive certainties. But it is also necessary to build more inclusive and stronger critiques and alliances.

Our conversation was initiated by Aisha Fofana Ibrahim (University of Sierra Leone/Fourah Bay College, Freetown) and Anne Menzel (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany) who met for the first time in person in Freetown in early 2014 when Anne interviewed Aisha—a prominent feminist scholar-activist—on her experiences as president of the 50/50 group, one of Sierra Leone’s largest women’s organizations. They stayed in contact and met again in Freetown in 2016 where Aisha invited Anne to give a presentation in a graduate seminar at Fourah Bay College’s Gender Research and Documentation Centre. It was after this seminar that Aisha and Anne began discussing about girls empowerment in Sierra Leone. At the time, shortly after the end of the Ebola epidemic, donor-funded and independently activist-organized girls empowerment activities were mostly happening with a focus on reducing teenage pregnancy, which was said to have increased dramatically during the Ebola crisis (see Denney et al., 2015, 12; Menzel, 2019, 446–448). Talk about teenage pregnancy and the need to promote empowering attitudinal and behavioural change among Sierra Leone’s girls was everywhere: on the radio, on billboards, in the Ministry for Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs, and among activists in local NGO offices and women’s organizations (see Menzel, 2017, 2019: 440–441). Since then, the topics have somewhat shifted. There is now more of a focus on ending child marriage (Government of Sierra Leone, 2018) and on punishing and preventing sexual violence against minors (see e.g. Schneider, 2019). But the emphasis on girls empowerment remains and has manifested in massive sensitization efforts,



life-skills training, and the creation of “safe spaces” for girls (see e.g. Denney et al., 2016, 14–16).

Both Aisha and Anne have remained sceptical of these empowerment activities, agreeing that they pay too little attention to girls’ (and women’s) structural and material conditions that will most likely continue to hold them down even if they change their attitudes and behaviours. They also agree that it makes sense that donors/so-called development partners favour girls empowerment approaches, given that they are relatively cheap and in line with established gender priorities (see also Bessa, 2019: 1949). But why do many activists in Sierra Leone also approve of girls empowerment approaches and adopt and seemingly reproduce them even in their non-donor-funded initiatives? Inspired by a recent essay by UK-based scholar and journalist Yemsi Akinbobola (2019), in which she argues that neoliberal feminism is and likely will remain popular among Nigerian feminists, ‘problematic though that may be’ (Akinbobola, 2019, 50), Aisha and Anne decided to take their questions to the only people who might have answers: to at least some of the activists in question.

Aisha then reached out to activists within her network across different organizations and forums in Sierra Leone, in which she is considered an elder (in the double sense of age and acquired respect and authority) in a space where many girls empowerment activists belong to younger generations. She quickly received enthusiastic responses from Alice James, Mariatu Kabba, Aminata Kamara, and Nicky Spencer-Coker who replied that they found the topic highly relevant and would be eager to connect and discuss. All four hold university degrees and have worked in various professional positions, including for international and local NGOs in Sierra Leone. They identify as feminists and have been involved—in their jobs and as members of girls’ and women’s networks and organizations—in promoting girls empowerment in Sierra Leone. In this way, they have contributed their expertise and dedication to a cause they feel passionate about. What exactly “girls empowerment” means for them was among the issues we discussed.

Our conversation took place in two after-work evening sessions on Zoom, the first on 25 May and the second on 1 July, 2021. Before the first meeting, Aisha and Anne circulated a one-page summary of the academic critique of girls empowerment, here usually meaning a donor-promoted type of “smart economics” that focuses on changing girls’ attitudes and behaviours to achieve developmental gains. Its basic rationale is best understood in terms of a neoliberal responsabilization of vulnerable populations. It holds that Global South girls’ have “unique potentials” to end poverty, if only they put their minds to it and work hard enough: to stay in school, then get employed or have their own business, and create monogamous and caring families so that they can see to their own children’s proper upbringing and education. This take on girls empowerment has been informed by Women in Development and later Gender and Development debates since the 1970s (Bedford, 2009, Chapter 1; Moeller, 2018, Chapter 2). It also received key inspiration from corporate social responsibility schemes in the early 2000s, most prominently from the Nike Foundation’s “Girl Effect” campaign, which firmly established the business case for investing in girls—establishing the “fact” that investing in girls (usually meaning investing in their attitudinal and behavioural change) will yield developmental returns (Moeller 2014;



2018, 12–22; Calkin, 2015). Major bilateral and multilateral donors such as the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the World Bank have now been pushing girls empowerment for more than a decade (Moeller, 2018, 87–91). Academic critics have argued that this focus has placed the burden of achieving a highly disciplined and individualist version of betterment on vulnerable populations—without any matching commitment to creating structural and material conditions that would at least raise girls’ chances of achieving the envisioned “success” (e.g. Denney et al., 2016, 19; Moeller, 2018, 37–38; Bessa, 2019, 1945; Menzel, 2019, 452–454; Price, 2019, 84).

In addition to a summary of this critique, Aisha and Anne circulated the following three questions prior to our first session on 25 May 2021:

- In your view, who has been driving the current interest in girls empowerment in Sierra Leone? Was it the Sierra Leone government, outside donors, feminist activists within Sierra Leone, diaspora activists, still others, or a combination of all?
- What kind of activities, efforts, and projects are currently going on in the area of empowering girls?
- Do you think that a focus on empowering girls is complementing or replacing interest in feminist activism more broadly?

In preparation for the second meeting on 1 July, Aisha and Anne asked for clarifications in three areas:

- After our first discussion, it seems that everyone agrees that something rings true in the critique of girls empowerment but that it is still “not all bad”. Please explain more and give examples.
- We also talked about how donor money influences and perhaps hinders your work and activism. In your view, how do organizations (or movements?) have to change in order to become able to work without donor funding? Could this be the way forward? Please explain and, if possible, provide examples.
- Towards the end of our last discussion, we also touched upon questions regarding possibilities for a broader feminist movement in Sierra Leone. In your view, which issues and topics would such a movement need to tackle that are not already part of current conversations? What kind of relationships should there be between “elite women” and the grassroots and between girls and their advocates and older generations?

The remainder of this article first introduces all five participants and then presents a shortened and edited version of our two-part conversation. Taken together, we discussed for three and a half hours (thus producing more than 40 pages of transcribed text). All co-authors approved the shortened and edited version presented in this article.

We would also like to stress that the conversation you read below is neither finished nor polished but rather a humble start. It contains uncertainties, even some



contradictions, and new questions. This is hardly surprising given the complexity of the topic and the wealth of professional and personal experiences that informed the conversation. We made no attempt at presenting a smoothed out account. Also, we plan to keep in touch and continue the conversation.

Introducing the participants

The following short biographies were provided by the co-authors.

Aisha Fofana Ibrahim

Aisha Fofana Ibrahim is a feminist scholar and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) advocate, based at Fourah Bay College, who has held executive and senior management positions in both academia and civil society in Sierra Leone. Among other positions, she was the director of the 50/50 group (2013–2015), a prominent civil society organization in Sierra Leone that focuses on ensuring women's equal political representation and promoting gender equality in Sierra Leone. Dr. Fofana Ibrahim is an accomplished researcher, facilitator, and mentor who designs, implements, and evaluates GESI-related projects for diverse institutions. She has published widely on a range of topics. Her current academic research focus is on gender and artisanal mining and the impact of Ebola on women and girls. She also works on violence against women, women's political participation, and women's narratives and auto/biographical writings. She holds an MA in Communications and a PhD in English/Gender Studies from Illinois State University.

Alice James

Alice is currently the Head of Programmes at FoRUT, an organization that aims to empower men, women, and children to fight poverty, corruption, injustice, and alcohol and drug abuse through social mobilization, advocacy, capacity building, and provision of services for long term development. Prior to this, Alice served in a number of professional positions, e.g. as Programme Manager at the British Council; as Regional Manager for the Northern Regional Programme for ActionAid Sierra Leone; and as Bombali District manager, HIV and AIDS Coordinator and women's rights focal person. She worked with ActionAid Sierra Leone for nearly fifteen years both at the national and local level. Alice holds a BA from Fourah Bay College (Geography), an MSc degree in Public Health from the University of East London, and an MSc in Strategic Human Resource from University of Roehampton, UK. She has over 20 years of experience working on gender, particularly women's rights issues (programming, budgeting, auditing, and results-based accountability).

Alice is a passionate and results-oriented person. She has supported communities, government and civil society organizations, and colleagues to develop actions that helped them recognize and develop their ability and potential in organizing



themselves in responding to share problems and needs. She also worked as a humanitarian and project officer during the 10-year rebel war in Sierra Leone.

Mariatu Kabba

Mariatu Kabba is a 2021 Mandela Washington Fellow with more than seven years of experience in broadcast journalism. Her innovative radio programming skills give voice to the marginalized as she relates inspiring stories of women and girls who push boundaries to make a mark in traditionally male dominated areas. Currently, Mariatu is a radio mentor at BBC Media Action Sierra Leone, where she works with community stations to enhance programming, gender mainstreaming, and safeguarding. Known for her community service, peacebuilding, and gender activism, Mariatu is the co-founder and executive director of Strong Women, Strong Girls Sierra Leone, a non-profit mentorship initiative that strengthens the socioeconomic status of women and girls. An avid writer with an interest in social accountability issues, Mariatu holds a BA in Mass Communication from Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, and is currently pursuing a course on Peacebuilding and Nonviolence at the Global Unites Master Trainers Academy. Mariatu is motivated to champion issues affecting the growth of women and girls and to provide them with the leadership skills to be successful in life. On completing the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders, she intends to use the experience and networks gained to expand her initiative to more regions across Sierra Leone and Africa.

Aminata Kamara

Aminata is a feminist and an adolescent girls programme specialist. She is passionate about designing, implementing, and managing programmes that create an enabling platform for adolescent girls to discover themselves, make informed decisions pertaining to their lives, and be their unapologetic selves.

Aminata has close to a decade experience in managing and delivering social and economic empowerment programmes for adolescent girls and boys through different civil society organizations like BRAC & Initiative for Children and Youth Improvement (ICYI). She is an expert trainer on programme management, Life Skills, communication soft-skills and has rolled out training sessions for adolescent girls and colleagues in her line of work. Also, she has conducted research on understanding the sexual and reproductive health issues of adolescent girls in Sierra Leone after the Ebola epidemic which was funded by Irish Aid. She is currently a Senior Programme Manager at Purposeful where she embarks on grant making with the With and for Girls Fund Team.

Purposeful is a feminist hub for girls' activism, rooted in Africa and working all around the world. Centring 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.



Anne Menzel

Anne is currently a postdoctoral researcher at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, and holds a doctorate (German PhD equivalent) from the same university. She previously worked in postdoctoral positions at the Center for Conflict Studies, University of Marburg, and at Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle. Much of her research has focused on conflicts and donor-funded interventions in post-war Sierra Leone. Anne also briefly worked as a freelance NGO consultant on gender, development, and peacebuilding in West Africa. Her research combines a focus on problems that are considered policy-relevant with ethnographic research and sociological perspectives: How are projects and policies in the name of peace, security, justice, and development related to or disconnected from the hopes and struggles of those they purport to help and empower? How do nominal “beneficiaries” make sense of, embrace, or reject the problems and solutions they are presented with? These are recurrent questions in Anne’s work. For future projects, she plans to also bring these perspectives to donor-funded work/activism in Germany and explore tensions and combinations between activism and professional project work in NGOs in the Global South and North.

Nicky Spencer-Coker

Nicky Spencer-Coker is Head of Advocacy & Movement Building at Purposeful, a feminist hub for girls’ activism rooted in Africa and working all around the world. Purposeful’s work is centred around a distinct Theory of Change, namely redistributing power assets, building collective power, organizing power holders, and transforming power structures.

Nicky is a practising barrister and solicitor in Sierra Leone with a BA in Political Science from Miami University (Ohio, USA) and a JD from David A. Clarke School of Law, University of the District of Columbia (USA). A former State Counsel at the Ministry of Justice and Senior Defense Counsel at the Sierra Leone Legal Aid Board, she serves as General Secretary of the General Legal Council, the authority responsible for the regulation of the legal profession in Sierra Leone.

A former President of Power Women 232, a network of women professionals and entrepreneurs, and Vice-President for L.A.W.Y.E.R.S, Sierra Leone’s female lawyers’ organization, she is always willing to serve in the interests of women and girls. Additionally, Nicky is the Saturday Breakfast Show presenter on Capital Radio SL and a much sought after compere. She was recognized as being among the 100 Most Inspiring Sierra Leoneans and among the 50 Most Influential Sierra Leonean Women 2019 and 2020.



Part 1: 25 May 2021

The first part of our conversation took place on a Tuesday evening, starting at 7 p.m. Sierra Leone time. Mariatu was still stuck in traffic on her way home and joined a bit later.

We began with some introductory back and forth over the course of which Alice, Nicky, and Aminata emphasized how much they had enjoyed reading the summary of the critique of girls empowerment and how interesting they found it ...

Aisha: Thank you! We really look forward to hearing about the experiences you want to share with us. This is something that Anne and I have been talking about for a while now, over a year. We have been thinking about how we might do research in this area. Because feminist scholars have been writing a lot about these issues. We wanted to engage activists and practitioners as well to understand what you think about the discourse around empowerment, especially with regard to young girls. So, Anne, do you want to come in?

Anne: Let me just say that I am very interested in hearing about what it is that you found interesting when reading the summary we sent. Please also feel free to raise your own questions in addition to ours.

Aisha: Yes, we don't want you to limit yourselves to our questions. Maybe we can begin with what you found interesting—or with one of our questions or one of your own. Who wants to start?

Aminata: I can start. When I was reading through the documents [the summary of the critique that Aisha and Anne circulated] and saw the argument about neoliberal empowerment, I was amazed. Because from my background and the work I have done over the years, it always brought me to this particular point: You cannot design a program for adolescent girls without considering the multifaceted aspects involved. Setting the path towards empowerment, raising their awareness so that girls take their own matters into their own hands ... all of this is not enough if we don't also think about the systems and structures that suppress and limit girls. Take, for example, a young woman like me. With everything that I have done, now I make money and I am taking care of myself, I am a mom. Yet I still experience that the system is trying to suppress me, to mute me. Now think about the challenges a young girl is facing in Sierra Leone. This is why it needs to be a multifaceted approach.

And another conclusion I came to is that this is a grey area. It is not either that girls empowerment is wrong or that the critique is wrong. We have to look at all of the arguments and pick what is best, in the best interest of girls.

Aisha: Thank you Aminata.

Alice: I am also excited to be part of this conversation. When I was reading the documents, one of the things that I thought about was women's personal autonomy. Are there policies in place, are there laws that actually protect us from this patriarchal system that we have been part of since the colonial era and up until now? When we think about the economy and about sexuality, we do not even enjoy our personal autonomy yet.

Anne: Nicky, do you want to come in?



Nicky: Yes. It was interesting to read the documents. On the one hand, I thought, well, that's true. I am not going to argue with some of the criticism. Still, it may not necessarily be a bad thing in the Sierra Leonean context. It serves and served a purpose. Now, I work in an organization, Purposeful, in which we focus very heavily on resourcing and mobilizing adolescent girls, building their power, etc. And there is recognition within the organization that we need to strengthen our feminism. We are a feminist organization. A lot of the time when you are working in these initiatives focusing on adolescent girls, what is missing is the ideology part of it. Empowerment is pursued without feminist ideology going hand in hand with it. So, if I was to jump to your third question, "Do you think that the focus on empowering girls is complementing or replacing interest in feminist activism more broadly?" I would actually say yes. This means that those of us who want to make broader connections need to make sure that feminist consciousness raising takes place. That's what really got me thinking and struck my interest. As we are working in these projects, how can we ensure that we keep this on our minds so that it is not just about empowerment? What does that mean really? Ultimately, what is the goal for someone who is a feminist or for a feminist organization?

Aisha: Yes, what's the goal? What I really want to talk about is this concept of "safe spaces" that everybody is jumping on, safe spaces for girls. Some of them may include feminist approaches. But I think not all of them do. We have a lot of girls empowerment programmes going on in the country. But what does it mean in the work that you do? When you say "I am trying to empower girls", what does it mean?

Anne: Mariatu is joining us now.

Everyone says hello ...

Alice: Before we continue, I want to answer the first question that you [Aisha and Anne] sent to us, "Who has been driving the current interest in girls empowerment in Sierra Leone?". I want to say and I really want to make it clear that the women of Sierra Leone have always been in the forefront. Other people who have joined us, our male counterparts, they've only given us tokenistic support because when you really look at it, they don't provide that support. I know that, over the years, women's organizations have benefited from support from partners, philanthropic organizations. We want to say kudos to them for that. But what can be the catalyst for enhancing our economic, social, and political empowerment? Is it that we continue to mobilize ourselves? Or is it that we continue to be dependent on donors or philanthropists? We all know that there are so many challenges that we are facing. We have economic challenges, we have sexual violence. Even though we are very resilient and we are driving the empowerment agenda for ourselves, we are still facing domestic violence, sexual assault, rape, rape of minors, marital rape, and traditional practices like FGM [Female Genital Mutilation]. Yes, we have challenges that our male counterparts do not have to face. So, all of that, you know, holds us back, even though we try to drive our agenda and we want to say thanks to organizations who have been giving us support.

Aminata: Dr. Aisha mentioned safe spaces, and I just want to give a brief background on how safe spaces came about and how they became a trend in Sierra Leone. About ten years ago, Population Council [an international NGO based in New York] was operating in Sierra Leone. They developed a survey that helped to



really get a clearer picture of the situation of girls in their communities (Population Council, 2010). Based on this, the decision to create safe spaces for girls was a political and intentional decision. Because we all know the background having been raised in Sierra Leone. People rarely paid attention to girls or listened to them. Their thoughts, opinions, and views were not taken into consideration in decision-making that affected them. So creating safe spaces was really an intentional decision to finally have spaces where girls can talk freely about things that have to do with their wellbeing. And then soft skills came into the picture ... so it was a political move for girls.

Of course, donors were also very interested in the idea. Because the Population Council survey was inspiring, it gave such a clear picture. Donors took this on and moved with it, and this also brought on board many implementing partners, NGOs, who were fascinated by the idea. But I think, as time went on, people lost the original intention of what safe spaces were supposed to be. Because it was meant to be a political space for girls: to own that space and have a voice in that space; to develop different soft skills that they will need to move forward and advocate for themselves; to also learn skills that will bring them money. But as time went on, people forgot the original intention of why safe spaces were created in the first place. They loved the idea and the name “safe space”. I think people find it really, you know, kind of fun. Some spaces even just brought girls together and they talked. I think it lost its value as we moved on. It’s been almost ten years. That’s just the background I wanted to give when it comes to safe spaces.

But if you ask me, “what has been driving that idea?” I’ll say it’s a combination of different factors. One is the donor interest in safe spaces. We were funded by BRAC and UNICEF at some point, and they were really interested in creating safe spaces for girls. That really moved other NGOs to go into that particular field because donors were interested in it. Also, activists and feminists in Sierra Leone ... at some point we realized that girls needed to have a voice. Of course, women from all walks of life were already struggling to have a voice. But with regard to girls, we knew that we had to give them a breeding ground to groom their abilities. And safe spaces were meant as a tool for that. So this particular intention coming from activists in Sierra Leone also helped promote the idea. Because, of course, if donors asked for something and partners in Sierra Leone said “No”, then the idea would have just died naturally. But we were also interested, we were really, actively hands on with that. It’s a combination. And also the government! At some point, when there was a rise in teenage pregnancy in the context of the Ebola crisis, a special unit was created to address this particular issue in Sierra Leone, the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy, which was also interested in safe spaces (see also Denney et al., 2016). They were also involved with the network created of organizations running programmes for girls, mostly safe space programmes. So they were also hands on with us, and we even came together and developed a life-skills training manual etc. So this is how it became a popular trend.

Nicky: Like I already said, the criticisms are not incorrect. But that doesn’t mean that the focus on girls empowerment is necessarily a bad thing or wrong. It served and serves a purpose. What we need to do, I suppose, as feminists, is to now do some more work to ensure that feminist consciousness raising enters the picture. If



you are a little bit of a student of the history and the waves of feminism, you will know that feminist movements always organized consciousness raising for women in smaller groups and meetings. You know, if we want to create some sort of mushrooming feminist movement in Sierra Leone, we will have to adopt some of these tactics.

Aisha: I find all of this very, very interesting. Because, Nicky, you are talking about creating a basis for a movement. And I think within this movement, the conversations that we should be having cannot just be about how our government hasn't done its best for us [e.g. regarding access to justice, see Fofana Ibrahim, 2021]. We also need to decolonize development. We need to talk about our so-called development partners and how they come with plans that are also oppressive in many ways. We are creating safe spaces for young girls, but we're not teaching them to question the models that we're using and how those models are themselves part of the problem. We're trying to empower young people to be able to eradicate poverty in the future. But you don't talk about the World Bank. You don't talk about racism that contributes to how we as Africans become poor. We don't talk about the kinds of loans that our governments take and that contribute to us being poor. There is a disconnect.

Nicky: I totally agree. And I mean, we're starting. Even within the organization where myself and Aminata work that is a conversation that's happening right now. As in, why, if we say we're feminists and X [major bilateral donor] is giving us this money, why do we need to take it? Once they give us this money, we're stuck with delivering projects because they want everything in a project format. This is how they want it delivered. But our way of thinking and of being is that, if you're going to build a revolution or a movement ... We're going to have to deconstruct all of this and do it our way. So, one of the best things for us that has recently happened is that some of that X money is going away. We have now totally rebuilt and restructured our model for our girls' circles, totally.

You know, when you have big donor money, you have to report to them a lot, whenever and exactly in the way that they want you to report to them. You may also be restricted in terms of having to ensure constant and very stringent monitoring and you will be less able to do things organically. Take, for example, our girls circle model, which has a large safe space and mentoring programme component in it. When we initially set it up, we had community-based mentors with 25 or so girls in a girl's circle who had to follow a very stringent curriculum. And then mentors had to report back at a certain time that, yes, you had this meeting and yes, you discussed these topics, etc. And what was missing in all of that was the fact that this was supposed to be some sort of political consciousness raising as well. Yes, the life skills are important, but there's more to it than that. We're now unlearning a lot of the programming that we got from X. We are not going to continue it in this same way. We are not going to ask them to report quarterly. And we're going to give mentors more leeway to decide on what they're going to talk about and how they're going to do it. Also and uniquely, our safe spaces are now also physical spaces. We provide resources to build safe spaces. So, that's really the process that we're in right now. And it's not tied to one year! These things that we're talking about, building a movement and developing different ways of thinking will not happen in accordance with a



18-to-24-month timeframe, which is usually what happens. You have this money for this timeframe, it comes, and then you have to report blah, blah. The project is done. But this is about building a movement. It is five years, 10 years down the line we're talking about.

Aisha: Great! I have another question. What can the women's movement in Sierra Leone learn from the girls empowerment movement. What is different? What is specific to girls? And are these things going on simultaneously, side by side, the empowerment of women and the empowerment of girls?

Alice: Auntie Aisha, I know we belong to different generations, but what I want to say is that the older generation did not stay connected. Now, the younger generation is much more connected and they try to build lasting relationships with one another so that they can transfer skills to those coming after them. If you go to a typical meeting where you have older folks, most of the time, it is about complaining how women do not support one another and pull each other down. But with the younger ones, I am not seeing that, I am not seeing that. I am in the middle, I get involved in older women's conversation and also in younger women's conversations. And the difference is that the younger ones are so connected and they don't want to be disconnected in any way, maybe because of the level of enlightenment that we have at this point. We have social media platforms that are helping to stay connected. You know, they have WhatsApp groups, Facebook chat rooms, Zoom. So, even if you don't want to go for meetings, you can have your meetings online. You can stay connected with your group.

Aminata: I want to add to what Alice just talked about. I don't want to generalize, but most of the time, I have experienced an unwillingness to learn and unlearn with the older women's groups. They are not willing to recognize that younger people have something to offer, to bring to the table. They should be open to analysing what they've been doing and what is trending now ... and let's see if there's a balance that works in the interest of women and girls.

Mariatu: Yes. So, let me just add to this. I think both groups [younger and older generations] have had different levels of challenges and progresses. When it comes to the older generation, you see a lot of class and standards. And there is this sense of elitism. They are always looking for a set of people who are above this level or within this particular section. If they don't meet these standards, regardless of their passion, you don't want to associate with them. This has been a main challenge between the two groups.

Nicky: It's true and it is interesting that there is perhaps an intergenerational disconnect. This has hampered the feminist movement—if there is one in Sierra Leone. I say if there is one, because there are many people who will talk about gender empowerment ... but as Mariatu and Aminata both said, older groups are not so welcoming to younger women. So if one of the purposes of the conversation here today is to talk about why there is more of a focus on girls empowerment at the moment, it is because it's less threatening to focus on issues that plague young girls. Everybody can get on board with that. But to have the trickier conversations that involve adult women and their agency in different spheres, that's a conversation that would really directly challenge patriarchy in Sierra Leone. It's very easy for everybody to get on board with girls empowerment. Sexual abuse



and sexual and gender-based violence against children is a horrible and terrible thing. We can all agree on that and we want to ensure that girls are more educated and have life skills to take care of themselves and their families. But then when we get into a more adult woman centred domestic violence debate or talk about the pay gap, the right to terminate your pregnancy, the right to determine who you marry, if you marry, when you marry ... Then, you know, it's getting a bit trickier. So, I think, those of us who have an interest in building a feminist movement really have to get in there and be intentional about feminist consciousness raising.

Mariatu brought something up about elitism. "Elite" always seems to be some sort of bad word in Sierra Leone. But it's not a bad word. There are people who do the intellectual legwork on which the rest of us then stand. Because there has to be some sort of understanding of the systems that have caused this situation we are living in. It's like ... you're 21 and you have this idea for a project or organization to empower other young girls. And when somebody tries to interject some of that critical theory into it, you get offended. You don't want to hear about it anymore. That is sometimes part of the problem as well. We have to learn not to just think that it is a bad thing. We have to connect both. Otherwise, you know, we're going to be plodding along for a while yet here in Sierra Leone.

We continued discussing the way forward for feminist movement building for a while longer. But it was getting really late and so we decided to schedule another meeting and continue the conversation.

Part 2: 1 July 2021

We met again on a Thursday evening, 8 p.m. Sierra Leone time. Nicky had excused herself for work-related reasons and Alice fell ill and could not participate. We decided to go ahead with our conversation and then share the recording and transcript with Alice and Nicky.

After some catching up and establishing that Alice would not be able to join us ...

Anne: Shall I start maybe?

Aisha: Yes, go ahead.

Anne: Okay, so Mariatu, Aminata, thanks for being here! As you know, Aisha and I went over the transcript of our last meeting, and you saw the questions we circulated. We want to come back to a few issue to explore them further. The first is that we found that you all agreed during the last discussion that the critique of girls empowerment as a form of development, also as a form of feminism, is not wrong. There is something in it that rings true because there is not enough focus on structures and material stuff like money, right? But there is something about girls empowerment that is also good, and this point was emphasized by all of you. Aisha and I just want to push you a little bit to tell us more about what you think is actually good about girls empowerment, what does it achieve? And what are its problems or shortcomings and how do you deal with them? The second issue is about relationships with donors. What do they enable and what do they constrain? And the third is about how girls empowerment fits into the women's movement in Sierra Leone.



Remember, Nicky argued that maybe there isn't really a feminist movement in Sierra Leone.

We would like to start with the question of what exactly you appreciate about girls empowerment. I just want to show you a picture that I took in Freetown a couple of years ago. I'm sure you all know the billboard in this picture. I'm just going to share my screen and show it to you. Do you remember this one? Can you see it?



A billboard in Western Freetown, picture taken in March 2017, photo credit Anne Menzel.

Aminata and Mariatu: Yes.

Anne: I think this billboard was put up somewhere near Congo Cross [a major traffic hub in Freetown] and it was huge, right? And it is a really good example. I mean, is avoiding teenage pregnancy really a matter of thinking, dreaming, and choosing? Is it not that many girls actually have to have sex in order to get an education? They need older boyfriends to give them money for their school and university fees (see also Menzel, 2019, 449–452). But none of this is covered on this billboard, which is a partnership between UNICEF, Irish Aid, and the Government of Sierra Leone. For me at least, this would be an example of where I see things going wrong. I don't know how you feel about it. I just wanted to use this to kick us off.

Aminata: I wouldn't mind starting.

Anne: Sure.

Aminata: Should I start with the picture or just ...

Anne: No, please, just whatever you want to start with.

Aminata: Ok, it is about girls empowerment in general. I also feel that we agreed in the previous conversation that most of the burden is placed on the female, the girl child, the woman, like it is her own responsibility what happens to her. There is not much focus on what support she can get from the system, what enabling empowerment she can get from society to help her thrive, to help her be empowered. Mostly



we use the word “empowerment” as if it were a package that you can just hand over to someone, failing to realize that it encompasses many other things rather than just increasing the awareness, the knowledge, the insight of somebody. It also entails other things: the support someone can get from society and the structures that are in place and working in the interest of that particular person. Let’s say now that girls have enough information, they are aware of things, they are able to make informed decisions. But they also face barriers that deter them from accessing and getting the services they desire and that they know exactly that they deserve. Because people, structures, service providers in the society do not have the same knowledge, the same approach as the girl or as the woman.

Much has been done to educate women and girls and little is done to inform service providers, to inform other key stakeholders who have a role to play. So I feel like a lot of burden is ... because the more you know, the more you want to change things that pertain to you. But you feel like there is little or nothing you can do and it goes back to being powerless, which is really a hurtful feeling compared to if you don’t know anything, you feel like “okay, this is how it works, this is how it’s supposed to happen”. But when you know that this is not how it’s supposed to happen, this is just the wrong way, it feels like you’re the only one in that world of yours. No one understands what you’re trying to say or what you’re demanding. Because the responsibility was not placed on everybody, in the sense that we all have to play our own role to educate ourselves, to inform ourselves. Rather it’s like, okay, women have to be empowered, you have to know things and you go out of your way to really know things. But when you know things, there is still no enabling environment.

Anne: One scholar has called this “informed powerlessness” (Bessa, 2019), which, you know ... Would you agree that this is part of what girls empowerment sometimes does?

Aminata: Yes, I totally agree. In fact, the term really speaks volumes. Just the sound of it, “informed powerlessness” totally captivates the problem.

Anne: Mariatu, do you also want to come in?

Mariatu: Okay, so let me begin with what is good about girl empowerment. You know, we have come a long way. We have come from a society where education, for example, used to be for boys only. And that was normal. But we gradually moved into an era where parents don’t think it’s okay for boys to be given educational opportunities and to leave the girl behind. I think that many people, though we do not yet have a hundred percent of the people, have realized that girls deserve a space in society and that they deserve equal opportunities, which is one good way to enable society to be successful because it needs the productiveness of girls. It takes boys and girls to walk together, to have equal space so that they can give back positively to society. So the willpower is there, and it has to begin with the girls themselves. Knowing that you are being valued, knowing that you are being prioritized ... Girls are no longer just seen as a material thing. Or, for example, families do not just think that they should invest in girls in the sense of sending them into early marriage so that the family will benefit from the husband’s family because of the girl. Girls should be invested into because they are human, because they deserve that. And it feels so good knowing that you are valued because of who you are, not what



they can gain from you. That's what girls empowerment is about. So that's really one good part of it.

I can't say we are there yet, but people are really beginning to see true role models, true good examples of women and girls who are going through the journey and have been able to give back positively because they were given the right opportunities and the right spaces. So for me, those are the things I really feel good about. Girls empowerment is a concept that is gradually getting attention. People are gradually accepting it, though some people are misunderstanding it. People are advocating for girls instead of standing together with them. They are standing for them instead of standing together with them. But I believe they will gradually get to a point where they will know that it is about standing with them, it's not for them anymore. So we are moving from a place of girls not being recognized to standing and talking for them. And very soon, I see Sierra Leonean society getting to a position where people can be standing with girls. I think we are getting there.

Anne: But part of what we discussed was that there isn't really enough focus on structures and material things. What do you think about this?

Mariatu: Sure, sure. It is not empowerment when there is no structure to support it. But again, it starts with willpower. We are not yet there but progress is being made. At least we have advocates and activists who stand up for girls. But the real power lies with those in authority, those who have power. And I don't know if they just haven't got the awareness yet or what. We have laws and policies that speak so well for the empowerment of girls, for every child in fact. If they became reality, it would really be impactful and great. But we hardly see this happening. If you take, for example, menstrual hygiene, it is a major problem in Sierra Leone. A girl will miss school because of her period. She will be stigmatized in school and she'll eventually be a dropout and then be forced into an early marriage. There is no structure within schools to enable a girl to experience a dignified menstrual journey. But you will see in official documents, the government will say A, B, C, and Z about what they have done for girls around their menstrual hygiene. They can say the big things, they can give big speeches. But in real life you don't see it. So it's challenging, the structures are not working for girls. And sometimes they say "a justice delayed is a justice denied", so when you get to things like gender-based violence, rape, and the other major issues affecting girls, it's frustrating to know that the laws are not working for them. Those who should be in charge are not dealing with these issues. They will have everything in their agenda, in their manifesto. But when they are in power, we don't see progress.

Aisha: I just wanted to ask, is the state, the Sierra Leone government, the only responsible party for girls empowerment? Should the state be the only because Mariatu, you keep talking about it.

Mariatu: Well I mention the state because it is one key actor. What's also important is the willpower of community heads, parents, and caregivers. It starts with the willpower. But the major people to enforce the law, to make sure people really act and go by those laws are those in authority.

Aminata: Yes, I totally agree with Mariatu. And Doc [Aisha], it's not just the state that is the only responsible body. But it has a huge role to play. Take, for example, education. When there was willpower to really move things regarding girl child



education, so many mechanisms were put in place to ensure that girls go to school. We saw that willingness from the state. But when it comes to other issues pertaining to girls empowerment, you will see that there is little interest and little action taken by the state. And no matter how other actors play their part, if the state does not take responsibility and plays its own role, it all goes back to zero. For example, I know a very vibrant activist who was at the frontline when we were embarking on the Black Tuesday campaign. We were pushing against rape and sexual penetration [the latter is the legal term for rape of a minor in Sierra Leone] and his own daughter got penetrated. We were fighting for the police to just take action and do their own part. It was the police who told the perpetrator how to get out of everything, like what excuses to use. It is so frustrating. It goes back to you knowing what is right and wrong, and yet there is not much you can do because the other responsible parties are not playing their part. And if we as adults and activists are facing these challenges, what about girls who have little resources, no networks to benefit from? Imagine the challenges they are facing as a result of the state failing to function properly.

Anne, you asked another question: Why is it worth doing girls empowerment activities? Like Mariatu said, we've made a lot of progress. No matter how many obstacles we still face, empowerment is a good thing. It's really a beautiful thing. To know is one thing, and there is so much power in knowing and in believing in yourself. So we cannot just say because we face challenges we don't want to be empowered, we don't want girls to be empowered. Because that is not what we want to settle for. We keep pushing, because we know the end goal. We can't stop, we can't settle for less because we know exactly what we are aspiring to and all of that is part of the empowerment for women and for girls.

Mariatu: But how do we move forward? One thing that I am really looking forward to is for organizations to no longer wait for donor money to take action. I want to see how good networking can encourage us to use our own initiative, our own internal strength to see how we can really create the desired impact we are looking for. Because the reality is, they [donors] are not there to cover all of our visions, and our passion grows wildly everyday like fire. We don't have the required number of donors to really see all this through, and we can't sit and wait. And most of these donors, they have certain criteria that grassroots organizations and young upcoming feminists cannot meet. So what should we do? Can you sit and wait? For instance, I started in 2018 [co-founding Strong Women Strong Girls Sierra Leone]. If I had waited for a donor to fund me, I could not have reached out to a thousand plus girls to date, for mentorship, awareness raising, motivational talks, and self-confidence building.

Anne: Yes, I think it is a widely shared feeling that activists need to find other ways to organize and realize their ideas. But often it's really difficult, right? Sorry Aminata, you were just going to say something.

Aminata: Yes. It's really a struggle. I feel your pain Mariatu. There are a lot of restrictions, a lot of steps, procedures are in place to access donor funds and it's mostly a struggle. Most donors are very directive. They tell you exactly what they want their resources to be spent on. So you end up in a position also of powerlessness. Like you want to do certain things, test certain initiatives, but you can't. As



Mariatu was saying, if you're a grassroots organization, there are certain requirements that you can hardly meet. Most grassroots organizations depend on either getting smaller grants or being self-funded. And mostly from their own pockets, which is really a struggle.

Aisha: I think one valuable format that can be realized without donor funding are mentorship programmes. But it depends on how they are designed. People are often not looking at the community level, they're looking at the big names [i.e. aiming to recruit nationally prominent women as mentors]. I think mentors should come from the communities where people live. They should be people whom they know and whom they can work with. Maybe you are a young woman and you live in a community where you see another woman and you like the way this woman is equal in her relationship at home. Then she can be your mentor. So we ask, who do you admire in your community and why? And then we match these people. There may not be many [mentors available], of course. I mean, we also do a mentorship programme at 50/50 and we focus on matching girls with women in their communities whom they can look up to.

Aminata: I agree with that Doc [Aisha]. At Purposeful we also depend greatly on having community-based mentors, and mostly our own model and our approach is not to have a mentor who is too far in age from the mentees. It's also about access. If the mentor is not from the same community, she may not be available in that moment when her mentee needs her.

So when I heard about Mariatu's mentorship programme [at Strong Women Strong Girls Sierra Leone] ... Mariatu, I was wondering whether you want us to have a chat about it? Like just reflect about it and see whether it needs any adjustments? I'd really love to provide support if you want some.

Mariatu: That would be a very, very great opportunity Aminata. Thank you so much for offering. I think I am already benefitting from this conversation. Let's catch up please, I really need your support in this. Because initially we did try to match school and university girls with prominent women whom they admire. So the girls would call big names and we then wrote letters to those women, you know? But it's not working because they are not in the same community, they are not at the same level, there is a very big gap between them. And when we realized that it's not effective, we decided to do the community mentorship approach. We are making progress compared to when we started. But we still need support.

Aisha: That's great, so we are making connections here already, and I think that's important so that we can boost each other.

Maybe this is a good point to turn to the "generation gap". We [older, more established activists] hear a lot about how elite women are not accessible for young and upcoming feminists. We hear those complaints. And I would like to hear from your own side, how young girls or adolescent girls see this relationship with older people. I think it's not just about empowering young girls, it's about getting them to understand that there is a movement they need to be part of. How do we get that going and how do we bridge that gap?

Aminata: We [at Purposeful] haven't really made any steps towards that except with feminist night school. This is an initiative we want to explore where we deal with different stuff around feminism. We're thinking of bringing in different



women, different feminists who get to interface with young women and girls. So that is one way we are thinking of linking the two [girls and the broader women's movement in Sierra Leone]. But honestly, we haven't been taking frantic efforts to bring the women's movement to the girls' movement.

Aisha: And why is that? I mean, I know your focus is on the girls, to have a movement of girls who are empowered and are able to articulate their issues. But these girls are going to become women and the issues are not much different. So why have you not intentionally done that? Do you know?

Aminata: It has only been of late that we started to really look at what we have been doing and pick out the loopholes. We [at Purposeful] have been funding community partners who have been doing safe spaces and life skills. But one aspect that has been missing is that girls apply critical thinking to their daily lives and really put that into reality. Hearing what you just said has also triggered my interest and I'll definitely take it to the team to reflect on it. Because of course it's very important Doc, like you said. In fact, girls cannot do it wholly and solely on their own, they need a social network of women as well. So I think we all need each other in diverse ways. In my view, there is no specific reason why we have not thought about it more. I think we just did not think about it in that intentional way before.

Aisha: Great, thank you. Mariatu?

Mariatu: Yes Doc. This gap is one of the major reasons that triggered me to start up something away from my main call, which is journalism. I've been into journalism for five, seven, eight years now and all through my journey, when it comes to getting the views of the female community, you get to hear the big voices, the legal voices [debates in Sierra Leone have very much focused on fighting sexual violence and promoting gender equality through legal reforms with prominent female lawyers at the forefront, see e.g. Abdullah, Ibrahim and King 2010].

So one day I started asking myself, "why can't we get younger voices? Why get a huge gap between the legal women and common girls? How do I go beyond journalism to help more girls to share their views and help more girls to stand up for themselves?" So that's one thing that really triggered me to start up Strong Women Strong Girls. It's about connections. It's difficult to take the experience, the knowledge of Dr. Aisha and pass it to the brain of a young adolescent girl. It just can't work because there is less connection, it's too heavy for her. So I decided to create a space where outstanding professional women can have direct links with university girls who are trying to get into the professional spaces and who have the capacity to learn so many things from that professional woman who is out there now. So this young girl can prepare herself for possible future barriers. And in time, this university young girl can be a mentor too. She can be a mentor to an adolescent girl who is preparing herself to get to the university. And this does not only work in the university, we can also do it with entrepreneurs and even in the informal sector. So this is my idea of making connections between the bigger women and the girls. For me, I think that can be a great strategy for anybody who has the passion and the willingness to breach the gap between the bigger women and upcoming girls. It's about making connections. So this is what we have been working on, though we are yet to get the desired impact.



Aisha: I often have younger women come to me and say “I want to start an organization”. And I tell them, “It’s not about starting an organization, it’s for you to insert yourself within one and influence its direction”. It makes sense to look for a big organization and work within a segment of that organization. I’m just saying, what’s happening in Sierra Leone is that everybody wants to own an organization, they want to start something. Which is good. But it may be a better strategy to get into a big existing organization and redirect that organization.

So if your passion is fighting sexual violence, violence against women, you go into that organization and be the lead for that aspect and create a niche within that organization. You are building the movement and you bring younger people into the process as well, connecting them with the older generation. So that’s what I usually tell them. I mean, if you think it’s important to have a separate organization then please, go ahead and do that. But I think that one of the things we have to think about is how do we sustain a movement? If we have so many splinters, how do we sustain a movement? Some people don’t understand this. They think everybody should own their own group. And I don’t think it’s helping the movement.

Aminata: Not at all. Another thing also is that ... I think we mentioned this in our previous conversation ... We’re making so many efforts for young people to learn and unlearn things that they’ve known to be true but that are not true and that do not work in their best interest. So there might actually be a challenge if we interface with the older generation that still has a mind-set that does not work in the best interest of the girl or the young woman. So we need them to also make efforts to learn and unlearn. Of course, they come with a lot of wisdom. But I’ve also spoken to older people and then asked myself, really? Is this someone I want to listen to and get advice from? Their mind-set is sometimes so toxic that I don’t even want to hear a second word. It got me scared.

Of course, we also have progressive women. Doc [Aisha] you’re one, you have inspired me greatly. But we also have older women who are really thinking like in the olden days. They are not progressive. We need to bring them into loop so that we’re all at the same level. So that when we’re interfacing, we’re really thinking progress, we’re thinking in the best interest of the female, the girl child or woman. I think that would create magic.

Aisha: Yes, thank you Aminata. But I think that’s why the younger people need to infiltrate those organizations. When you go in there, you’re going to change them. You challenge those backward ways of thinking. I challenge people all the time. When I entered 50/50, I was much younger and I really set out to change that place because the people you met there, they were set in certain ways. And I wanted to move the organization towards a feminist movement. So you get in there, you know your stuff, no disrespect. But people will listen because they also will want people to believe that they are up to date. It’s important that we have younger people with critical ways of thinking, especially feminist ways of thinking, to get into the spaces in numbers and begin to make those changes.

Anne: Can you give me an example of the kind of things these women say that you find so toxic and backward?

Aisha: Well, if somebody was raped they ask, “What was she doing there?” Or, “What was she wearing?” You know? Or they meet a single woman and ask, “Why



is she not married?” Just things like that. But anyway, let Mariatu and Aminata give you examples.

Aminata: A few days ago I was having a conversation with a colleague about a young girl who killed an older man in Nigeria. And everybody on social media was judging that particular young lady without really thinking about what might have prompted that action. I’m not going into that. But also in Sierra Leone, if you as a young woman are married and you’re facing challenges in your home, the first advice that people will tell you is “Bear”. “Be patient”, “Just endure”, “Marriage is just endurance”. I get mad. Then I think back, in the days when we were at university, we were thinking about those scenarios, not like inciting you but allowing you to think critically, is this what I want? Is this the best thing for me? When you love yourself, you’ll not allow another person to inflict harm on you. But if you ask an older woman, it will be “You see, I’ve been married for this long, do you know what my husband was doing to me? I endured”. It’s crazy. So things like that.

Mariatu: They tend to question so many things about you and how you see things because of your age. And if you’re just being yourself, they say, “Ah this feminism, you are getting sassy, and you do not care about marriage”. Is it wrong? What is wrong with being single and choosing your goals and trying to be a better person?

We continued talking about personal experiences for a while longer and then decided to call it a night. It was already late—and we knew that we were nowhere near to the end of this conversation. To be continued.

Please contact us if you want to join in.

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