

Mind Your Own *Business*

How One Girl's Business Brains program is clearing pathways for girls
in Sierra Leone — inside and outside of the classroom.

ONE GIRL

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One Girl research reports are written and shared so that we can celebrate our successes, acknowledge our challenges, contribute to public debate, and invite feedback on development practices.

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About One Girl: One Girl is an Australian not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting the millions of girls around the world without access to education to reach their learning potential inside and outside of the classroom.

All photos: One Girl, Restless Development and Oasis.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When Aminata was a child, she became a wife and a mother.

You read that correctly. She was just 14 when she got married to a much older man, and she gave birth to her first daughter one year later. Her parents couldn't afford to look after her and like a lot of families in Sierra Leone, they thought marriage was her best option. Despite being an excellent student, Aminata had to drop out of school to look after her daughter and before long, she became pregnant again.

Aminata says she felt an enormous sense of grief when she gave birth to another daughter. She thought, what kind of world am I bringing these girls into? What opportunities could I possibly give them?

Then one day, Aminata heard about a Girls' Club that had started in her community. It was a group of girls and young women — some teenage mums like herself — who were meeting weekly to receive training in business skills, life skills and more. Aminata was intrigued. She went along with a friend, not knowing that her life was about to be changed forever.

Aminata's eyes were opened

At her weekly Girls' Club meetings, Aminata learned about sexual and reproductive health, and how she could choose whether or not she wanted to become pregnant again. She learned about small businesses and how she could start one to earn an income and gain greater financial independence. She learned about her rights and the fact that child marriage was illegal. She learned that she had a choice in what she could do with her life.

Empowered with this knowledge, Aminata made a startling decision. She started her own business selling cakes — and she decided to divorce her husband.

Learning isn't confined to the classroom

What Aminata's story demonstrates is the power of education, no matter how it is delivered. While the ultimate goal of One Girl is to see every girl in the world have the opportunity to receive an education, we know it isn't possible for some girls who were forced to drop out due to early pregnancy or poverty. It doesn't mean they can't still seize control of their lives and go on to be successful.

Yet the current system is designed to see them — and even the girls who do graduate — fail. In Sierra Leone — like many countries in the world — there aren't a whole lot of formal jobs available for girls. There aren't a lot of jobs full stop, but deeply ingrained beliefs about the roles of men and women mean it is usually the men who work and women who take care of the children and home. Add the fact that women don't have any say in their own sexual or reproductive health and it's clear that solutions to achieve equality for girls beyond the classroom are vital.

A faint glimmer of hope

Back in 2012, a girl fainted during class from a lack of food. While upsetting, it wasn't uncommon; many students were forced to go to school on empty stomachs due to their family only being able to afford one meal a day. But this girl happened to be enrolled in the One Girl Scholarships program. And when we heard what happened, we asked how we could help.

It was suggested we support the girls in our Scholarships program to start their own businesses, so they could buy their own food and take the burden off their parents. The trial generated such amazing entrepreneurial skills, we decided to expand this part of the program and partnered with youth-led organisation Restless Development to develop a curriculum that covered things like financial literacy, bookkeeping and customer service. It was called Business Brains, but we also included components of life skills like leadership and decision-making, menstrual hygiene management and sexual and reproductive health so girls were equipped with more than just business knowledge — they had life-knowledge too.

However, we didn't want to limit the program to just the scholarship girls who were delivered the program in schools. We wanted girls who dropped out of school due to factors such as early pregnancy or poverty to be able to access the program; we called that part of the program Girls' Clubs and a few years later, Aminata became a member.

ONE GIRL

RESTLESS
DEVELOPMENT

ARE BUSINESS BRAINS BETTER BRAINS?

We felt like we were onto a good thing here but needed proof. So in early 2019, we engaged a team focusing on applied learning and research to work with internal stakeholders who designed, collected and interpreted the results in order to determine what impact Business Brains has been having on the communities we are working in. We wanted to know where we were nailing it and where we can go even better. Spoiler alert: the results are amazing.

Through group discussions and one-on-one interviews, we found out:

1. Sexual rights and personal freedoms are being embraced.

Previously taboo topics like periods and contraceptives are now being talked about more openly amongst communities and girls reported they are asserting their rights over their own bodies to their partners and families.

2. Pathways are opening up.

Business Brains is helping girls to set goals, have a clear direction for where they want to go in the future, and develop the confidence to follow through with their plans. In fact, 122 Girls' Club members have returned to school as a result of the training they received through the program.

3. Girls are paying it forward and communities are feeling the change.

Girls are supporting their families with money (such as buying lunch for their siblings), knowledge (helping their family run their business more effectively) and resources (sharing books with their siblings so they can go to school too).

4. They are becoming confident leaders.

Business Brains has given girls a belief in themselves. Many of them have gone on to give public speeches, become Head Girl at their school or just carry themselves with more confidence in their community because of the self-esteem that being part of Business Brains has given them.

What began as a way for girls to earn money outside of school hours has evolved into a program that clears the pathway for women like Aminata to start living a life she chooses. Business Brains recognises that while education is fundamental, only by addressing the root causes that prevent girls from staying in school or succeeding in the real world, will we see an end to worldwide gender inequality.

INTRODUCTION

We at One Girl know educating a girl is one of the most powerful ways we can change the world. (Our entire ethos is based on this fact, so we'd better be pretty damn sure of it!)

But the numbers don't lie. According to the World Bank, limited educational opportunities for girls and barriers to completing 12 years of education cost countries between \$15 trillion and \$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.¹

Let's say that again. *Thirty. Trillion. Dollars.*

Imagine what could be achieved with that money. Imagine what the world would look like if girls were educated to the same standards as boys. This is our mission and it's what drives us every single day: achieving universal education for girls.

But while education is absolutely fundamental, there are a multitude of other factors that prevent girls from reaching their full potential.

For example, an educated girl will only be able to run her own business, climb the corporate ladder or become the President of Sierra Leone (aim high, right?) if she has the skills and knowledge to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

She will only be able to decide when and with whom she has children if she's empowered to take her reproductive and sexual health into her own hands.

She will only be able to become a leader in her community if her people are willing to accept a female leader.

In short, she will only be able to put her education to use and go on to succeed if her path is clear, she has the support of those around her and she is confident in her own abilities.

One Girl is an Australian-based international non-government organisation (INGO) whose primary mission is to support girls to complete their secondary education or equivalent. Our Business Brains program runs parallel to our Scholarships program and helps to address the issues that could cause them to drop out early or fail to succeed once they graduate.

It's not just One Girl Scholars who benefit from this program. It is also being rolled out in schools across the country, reaching both boys and girls, as well as in Girls' Clubs for young women who haven't been able to complete school.

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the past six years of Business Brains, showcasing the wins, identifying the challenges, and planning for the next phase of the program to make sure girls have every opportunity to access pathways in and out of the classroom and that they become thriving, self-sufficient powerhouses ready to take on the world once they do.

¹ The World Bank, 2018, Not Educating Girls Costs Countries Trillions of Dollars, Says New World Bank Report, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/07/11/not-educating-girls-costs-countries-trillions-of-dollars-says-new-world-bank-report>

CURRENT MOOD

Discrimination against women in the workplace can be found in almost every society in the world. But Sierra Leonean women have the added challenge of living in a country that is scarred by 11 years of civil war and haunted by the epidemic of Ebola. About 80% of the nation's population live in poverty² and the country ranks 184 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index³. Change can be incredibly scary in such an unstable environment, so it's no surprise that the deeply ingrained beliefs on the traditional roles of men and women still remain strong in Sierra Leone, resulting in fewer employment opportunities for women and girls — even those who have an education.

Add to that the extremely high teen pregnancy rates (68% of sexually active girls in Sierra Leone become pregnant⁴) and it's clear that solutions to achieve equality for girls beyond the classroom are vital.

Changing the system = no mean feat

So how do you dismantle centuries-old stereotypes and create space for women to become badass bosses in a male-driven environment that is resistant to change — while still encouraging girls to complete their education in the interim? Great question. The answer is as complex as it sounds; however, through working with our partners in Sierra Leone, we identified three key areas that can help girls successfully transition out of school and into careers that are fulfilling, successful and sustainable. They are:

1. Building life skills for girls so they are confident, assertive and informed;
2. Clearing their path by challenging traditionally feminine and masculine roles and stereotypes in schools and in the wider community; and
3. Building knowledge around the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women in Sierra Leone, so women feel empowered to take ownership over their bodies and so their communities support their choices.

Never ones to turn away from a challenge, these three aims have now become the backbone of our Business Brains program.

What are “life skills”

UNICEF defines life skills as “psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.” Basically that means that girls being able to analyse and use information to make decisions in their own best interest, to develop good communication skills and be able to interact effectively with other people, to be self-aware and have empathy, and to increase their ability to cope with emotion and stress.

WHAT'S BUSINESS BRAINS?

We see all of our programs as collaborations between our staff, our partners, our supporters and the girls and communities we work with. Because without all the pieces of the puzzle working together, sharing information, raising funds and awareness, and contributing ideas, we might miss incredible opportunities to help more girls in Sierra Leone to succeed. You know what they say: a bucket load of heads are better than one! Business Brains is a result of this philosophy.

The first young entrepreneurs

In 2012 we realised that just providing school materials was not going to be enough for girls to succeed in their education and that girls needed to be equipped with other skills and knowledge in order to escape the cycle of poverty. They needed a sustainable solution and one that would allow them to earn their own money and become self-sufficient after graduation.

So we asked the girls what they thought and they suggested starting their own small business outside of school hours. We said “great!” and began a small trial project with 16 girls at a rural secondary school. Each girl was given a \$40 grant to kick start her business, with most choosing to sell rice, kerosene and other small goods. The trial was such a success that we did another pilot, this time with a larger group of 78 girls. The talent and business acumen shown by our budding entrepreneurs told us we were onto something good here.

When Restless Development met One Girl

While the fact that girls were earning their own money was great, we wanted to expand the program to address the root causes that prevent girls from attending and staying in school, and succeeding once they graduate. So in 2014, we partnered with youth-led organisation Restless Development and co-designed a curriculum that taught the girls basic business skills such as financial literacy, bookkeeping and customer service, as well as life skills like decision-making and public speaking, and sexual, menstrual and reproductive health.

However, we knew that we couldn't just keep these training sessions exclusive to girls. Not only did we want to empower all students to develop business skills for their future, but we wanted the communities we worked in to get behind the girls and support them in their business and future endeavours. So we decided to break the Business Brains program into two segments, tailored to the specific needs of each group.

The two arms of Business Brains

The program works inside and out of the classroom because we know that formal education pathways are not always the best way for girls to gain the skills they need to succeed. The program content allows girls to learn skills in business management (including bookkeeping, profit and loss and savings etc), personal development, leadership and decision-making, and to discuss the most pressing concerns they have as young women in their community. It also delves into sexual and reproductive health and rights awareness, and covers menstrual health and hygiene so girls no longer need to be held back just because they have their periods.

Select schools allow us to include the program in their school timetable and through this, so far we have been able to reach around 23,000 male and female students from late primary to senior secondary school. For girls who never attended school, are at risk of dropping out, or were forced to drop out due to teen pregnancy or early marriage, we created Girls' Clubs in 30 communities. The clubs provide safe spaces for girls to learn the Business Brains curriculum and as the majority of these girls are unable to complete school, they receive access to business mentorships and a village savings and loans scheme to further support the success of their businesses following the training. So far, 1,212 girls have participated in our Girls' Clubs.

Across both arms of Business Brains, the girls are building confidence, gaining self-esteem and developing better communication skills to help them tear down the glass ceiling and reach their potential!

From little things, big things grow

What began as a way for the girls in our Scholarships program to earn some extra money outside of school has since grown into a holistic, comprehensive program that has reached tens of thousands of girls and boys with messages of equality, empowerment and optimism for the future.

One of the best aspects of the program is that the community educators who deliver the Business Brains training are all young Sierra Leoneans themselves. They get trained up in how to run the classes, and get valuable leadership experience that they wouldn't have elsewhere. Lots of them are young women, which is awesome because we know that for a young girl with seemingly limited pathways, seeing a woman in a position of authority can make all the difference in the world.

² Danish Trade Council for International Development and Cooperation, 2017, Labour Market Profile: Sierra Leone, http://www.ulandssekretariatet.dk/sites/default/files/uploads/public/PDF/LMP/Imp_sierra_leone_2017_final.pdf

³ United Nations Development Programme, 2018, Human Development Reports, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2018-update>

⁴ Farzaneh, N., 2013, Sierra Leone: An Evaluation of Teenage Pregnancy Pilot Projects in Sierra Leone, UNICEF, https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_72952.html

PUTTING OUR THEORY TO THE TEST

Since partnering with Restless Development, we have completed two two-year cycles of the program as it exists today: 2014 to 2016 and 2016 to 2018. So in early 2019, we decided it was time to carry out an external study* of the program to determine what worked about the program and what didn't, who benefited from it and who needed more support, and how could we shape and improve the program moving forward.

After all, the students we work with have to undergo regular examinations ... it's only fair that we do too!

Finding Oasis

We engaged the Oasis School of Human Relations, a UK-based not-for-profit with over 30 years' experience in organisational change and development, to do the study. We chose them not only because of their stellar reputation but because of their "Whole Person Approach" to evaluation, which places the learner at the centre of the process and uses metaphors, storytelling, creative cards and objects to stimulate non-linear thinking. The approach encourages interviewees and focus groups to use their creativity to explain how they feel, so we get a richer, fuller picture of the program, rather than just "it works" or "it doesn't work".

Furthermore, Oasis are unique in that they allow the people responsible for the program (aka us and Restless Development) to input into the design of the study itself. This promotes trust, cohesion, creativity and allows people to feel safe to be themselves — a philosophy that is totally up our alley.

"We have taken part in participatory evaluations before, but never like this. We have never been asked to prioritise the evaluation's criteria and input into its questions."

— Participating staff member

The whos and the whats

As a team, staff from One Girl, Restless Development and Oasis came up with the main criteria for who would participate in this study and what we wanted to find out. We worked together to select 10 out of 30 communities to engage based on factors such as their location, if they were community or government schools, and whether they were participating in other programs that could impact on their answers. We also came up with six key areas we wanted to focus on, which we then prioritised into two categories: top criteria and underpinning criteria. To do this, we adapted the internationally accepted [DAC criteria](#) to have a One Girl and Restless spin on it, and we came up with the below criteria.

Top criteria	Impact	Appropriateness of activities	Youth agency
	Learn about the positive and negative changes that came from this program, whether directly or indirectly.	Determine whether the activities undertaken in the program were suited to the priorities of the people and communities we work with.	Clarify whether youth leadership and empowerment remain central to the program.
Underpinning criteria	Community engagement	Legacy	Appropriateness of resources
	Assess how involved and consulted the communities feel and how much they know about the program.	Ensure the sustainability of the program beyond any unforeseen cuts to funding.	Evaluate the effectiveness of the tools and resources used in the program to see if changes could make them better quality, less time consuming or cheaper to roll out.

* This study was conducted based on the principles of a program evaluation, however One Girl's approach promotes a culture of applied learnings and inclusive and equal participation that challenges hierarchies in traditional research and evaluation methods.

Annnd ... action!

In February 2019, the Oasis study team divided into three groups and visited the selected communities to begin the study. They held 25 focus group discussions and 30 one-on-one interviews engaging a total of 232 people, of which 61% were female and 39% male. This data was triangulated with the results of an evaluation completed internally by Restless Development at the close of the program in 2018, which engaged a further 221 girls through individual interviews and focus group discussions, and 12 community and school stakeholders through individual interviews across five districts.

The groups that the Oasis study team spoke to comprised mainly of the students, teachers and community members involved in Business Brains, but also included three staff members and a government representative. Immediately after data collection, the teams shared their experiences in another peer-based workshop to review each other's work and to make sure they were on the same page with reporting and feeding back.

THE RESULTS ARE IN (SPOILER: IT'S AMAZING)

Now the fun part! After they crunched the numbers and combed through the hundreds of responses, Oasis presented One Girl and Restless Development with a comprehensive report on everything they had learned about the first six years of Business Brains. And oh, what we learned!

1. Sexual rights and personal freedoms are being embraced

Previously taboo topics such as menstrual hygiene, safe sex, family planning and discrimination are now being talked about more openly amongst communities engaged in Business Brains. Participants reported going home and talking to their parents about pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases — even encouraging them to use condoms to prevent any unwanted children!

Girls have also been sharing what they've learned about menstrual hygiene with their mothers, some even influencing them to the point of getting latrines installed in their homes. In fact, 8 out of 10 girls said they felt they had acquired new knowledge about menstrual hygiene thanks to the training, and members of the Girls' Clubs said the use of reusable pads is now very common and publicly discussed amongst members.

"I now know about menstruation and how to take care of myself."

— Business Brains participant

One of the most powerful changes, however, has been girls feeling empowered and knowing their rights when it comes to their own sexual and reproductive health. Some reported taking a stand against ingrained beliefs of how men should treat women and asserting their rights over their own bodies to their partners and families.

"The businesses have made some of us become financially independent and not to rely on our parents and boyfriends for survival and support. This helped free ourselves from teenage/early pregnancy and sexual abuse by our boyfriends."

— Girls' Club member

Case study:



Ruth

When Ruth* was just 15 years old, instead of focusing on her senior years of high school, she was getting ready for her wedding day. Not long after her wedding, Ruth became pregnant – and she was forced to drop out of school.

But Ruth never gave up on her dream of one day making it to her graduation! Following the birth of her first child, she was more determined than ever to finish high school.

Enter our Business Brains program!

When Business Brains started up in her community, Ruth became a member of a Girls' Club, where she learnt how to start a small scale business so she could become financially independent! With the skills and support she received through Business Brains — matched with her incredible determination — she eventually saved up enough funds to return to high school! Talk about hustle!

*We've changed Ruth's name to protect her identity.

Safe spaces for sexual health — a word from Zoe Condliffe

"I think it is very interesting indeed to draw a link between a business program and sexual and reproductive health outcomes for women and girls. Creating safe spaces where topics such as periods, sex and contraception can be discussed leads to destigmatisation and a wonderful openness and sharing about these topics in the broader community.

"Women's bodies are often taboo to talk about, and as a result, women all over the world grow up not understanding their own bodies. The cloaked nature of normal processes such as menstruation, sex and sexual health holds women back from opportunities. It's interesting to see that this program is working to address this in two ways. By teaching sexual health, it is empowering women with business skills, and by teaching business skills, it is empowering women in the area of sexual health. The Business Brains program is creating safe spaces where conversations about women's sexual health can be had. When women share stories and personal experiences with each other they often undergo a process of transformation where they go from feeling isolated in their experience to feeling like a part of a collective. This has health outcomes: it may mean that women are able to understand their body is normal, or it may mean they are better able to recognise when their rights are being violated.

"From my experience working with women who share stories of gendered-violence, this is a hugely transformative moment for them in understanding their rights, take ownership of their bodily autonomy and demand better from their community. I am especially excited about the link between business and female sexual empowerment. Economic empowerment is so important for women and it's so good to see that by achieving financial independence through Business Brains, women are becoming less vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy and sexual abuse. While we aspire to a world where women don't fear sexual assault and child pregnancy at all, it is heartening to see that women can avoid such outcomes for themselves to an extent by becoming financially empowered through business. This is a great start."

– Zoe Condliffe, the CEO and Founder of She's A Crowd; a tech-enabled social movement to end gender-based violence: driven by data and powered by the stories of women.

2. Pathways are opening up

The study found that Business Brains is helping girls to set goals, have a clear direction for where they want to go in the future, and develop the confidence to follow through with their plans. For girls already in school, the career development portion of the program has helped them to make choices for secondary school based on their passion or skill set (for example, enrolling in science classes if they wanted to be a nurse or a doctor).

"We now share with our families what we want to become in life and no longer the decision of our parents or friends. Now [we are] confident to choose which stream to enrol [in] and what we want to become in life. We believe that everybody can become successful [they] just need to apply good work and effort."

– One Girl Scholar

Something we already knew (but were excited to see on paper!) is that 122 members of the Girls' Clubs — who had previously been forced to drop out of school due to early pregnancy or who never attended school in the first place — returned to school as a result of Business Brains!⁵ Through the income earned by their businesses, they were able to pay for their school fees, books and materials such as uniforms and shoes, as well as continue to provide for their children and/or parents.

"Some of us have been doing business for the past one year, some seven months and some five weeks. We use the profit to take care of our educational needs: pay school fees, buy books, school bags ... and support our parents/families at home."

– Girls' Club member

Teaching participants about financial literacy and savings has proved incredibly successful. About 60% of participants have a savings plan in place and 20% have already saved money from their businesses. The majority (81%) say the training has helped them to establish good work practices, such as writing down business records, rather than remembering customer details by heart.

Perhaps the most heartening fact to come out of this portion of the study was the note that the majority of girls who completed Business Brains left feeling optimistic and hopeful about their future. Compared to participants surveyed midway through the program, there was a 21% increase in this feeling by the end of the program. There was also a considerable increase in girls having a greater sense of knowing what they wanted to do in the future (48% increase from participants midway through the program to those who completed it).

Equal opportunity — a word from Valeria Ignatieva

"At WORK180, we believe that all women should have the chance to participate and succeed. Our jobs board pre-screens employers to ensure they support women in the workplace, but it's equally important for young girls to receive the right support so they see viable career opportunities ahead of them. For this to happen, they need equal opportunity, inclusive education programs and gender initiatives that help girls own their futures. The One Girl campaign is a powerful force in this drive for equality and we support it wholeheartedly."

– Valeria Ignatieva, Co-founder and CEO of WORK180

3. Girls are paying it forward and communities are feeling the change

It is clear that the impact of Business Brains is rippling out into the communities where we work and the change is mainly led by the girls in the program who are passing on the benefits. During the study, we heard from girls who are supporting their families with money (such as buying lunch for their siblings), helping their mothers with record keeping for their family business and sharing books with their sisters so they could go to school too.

"At first, our mothers were doing business but did not know how to sell well but now we are teaching our mothers and they are selling well."

– Girls' Club member

⁵ Following the Ebola outbreak, one of the major consequences was the significant increase in girls who became orphaned and then pregnant as teens; many as a result of sexual violence or resorting to transactional sex for survival. To prevent these girls being 'bad influences' on other school-going girls, the government placed a ban on pregnant girls attending school. This has led to and continues to result in thousands of girls being denied an education. Amazingly, in 2019 two advocacy organisations are taking the Sierra Leonean government to court and demanding that this ban is lifted. The case was brought to the ECOWAS court in June 2019.

Teresa

Teresa* means business. When she was in primary school, she started selling butterscotch and fry cakes to pay for her school fees and to help support her family.

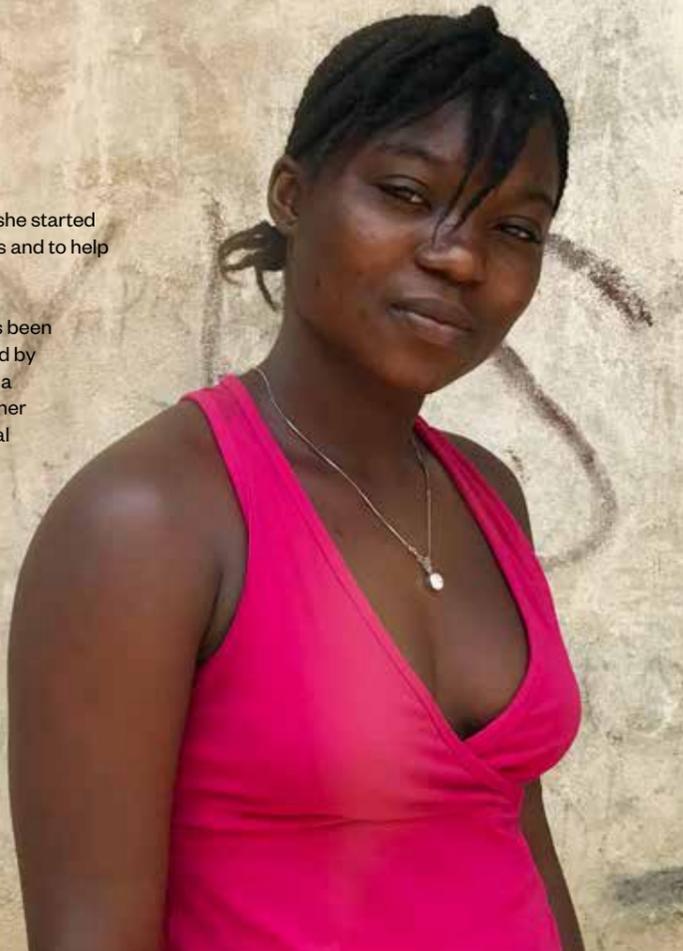
It's pretty incredible that from such a young age, Teresa has been passionate about her education. And this passion is inspired by her hard-working Mum, who has her mother has worked as a farmer since she was a young girl. To Teresa, her mother is her number one role model because despite not having a formal education, everything her mother has done has been for her children.

Teresa also wants to become a role model in her community by becoming a nurse so she can support other young women and save lives.

"I want to be a good example for my friends, and I can, as I am ahead in my education. If I am strong in my education, others will follow me".

Now at age 20, Teresa is a member of a Girls' Club within her community — and she wants to eventually lead the club when One Girl is no longer needed to run the program!

*We've changed Teresa's name to protect her identity.



4. Girls are becoming confident leaders

Business Brains has given girls a belief in themselves. There was an overwhelming sense of belonging amongst participants. They are now part of a group that is encouraging them to go back to school and finish their education, rather than being marginalised in the community for dropping out or being unable to attend. Many girls commented on their pride in their school uniforms, and how their shoes and bags, and the lessons in self-care (such as with menstrual hygiene) have given them a dignity and sense of value they previously didn't feel.

The Girls' Club members in particular are seen as an inspirational and united group of peers.

"We feel much more confident and know that the future is more secure for our lives. Our confidence level has changed regarding our future because we now make informed decisions over our careers."

– Girls' Club member

Older Girls' Club members are mentoring other girls outside the clubs and also assisting younger members with their businesses and training.

"If I am strong in my education, others will follow me slowly."

– Girls' Club member

There were also multiple accounts of girls who completed the program becoming head girls at their schools and beginning to speak out in assemblies as a result of the program and their new revered status.

"I want to be a good example to my friends as I am ahead of others in terms of education."

– Business Brains participant

Women in leadership — a word from Madeleine Grummet

"In a complex age of rising political tensions, rapidly evolving global economies and the planet facing a future climate crisis, we need a new leadership style to emerge that is soft and strong, values-first and built on community, equality and collaboration, not aggression, competition and the binary lottery of gender.

"Currently women hold less than 7% of leadership positions worldwide. We need a critical step change to shift the balance of power, and create greater educational opportunities, active mentorship and future career pathways for today's girls so they can step up to be the leaders of tomorrow's world. Leadership is like a muscle - you build it over time through access to knowledge, raising your hand and finding your voice.

At girlworld we believe every young woman has the ability to lead."

– Madeleine Grummet, CoFounder and CEO of GirlWorld

The ripple effect, the collective impact, paying it forward, or just simply looking after each other is at the heart of what Business Brains is achieving with women and girls, not just because we know that educated women are up to 40% more likely to volunteer, give to charity and support a stranger⁶, but as Julie McDonald tells us, they are also the most generous ...

The ripple effect — a word from Julie McDonald

The idea of collective impact is at the core of what we do at The Funding Network (TFN). Our live crowd-funding events bring Australians from all walks of life together to pool donations and in-kind support for a greater impact than they can achieve alone. Studies consistently show that women are amongst the most generous and consistent donors to charities – and our events support this funding. We've also seen growing support for charities supporting women and girls at our events. Last year, we held a TFN Live event in Melbourne to celebrate grassroots social change projects creating life-changing outcomes for women and girls. Together, these charities support newly arrived migrant women to become financially independent; improve maternal and child health outcomes for women experiencing disadvantage; and enable women charged with a criminal offence to access mentoring support. The all-female leaders of these organisations shared their stories of social change and inspired so many to give generously to further the incredible work they do. Over \$90,000 was raised in just a few hours from a lively and supportive crowd, showcasing the power of the collective."

– Julie McDonald, CEO, The Funding Network Australia



Case study:

Fatima

We're constantly inspired by the extraordinary strength of the young women in our programs.

Fatima* has lost nearly every member in her family.

Yet despite so much loss, Fatima has nothing but hope for her future. When Fatima saw an ad to become a volunteer in our Business Brains program – she didn't hesitate to apply! Her application was successful, and she was able to move into a community house with other Business Brains volunteers.

Fatima is proud to talk to different community members about Business Brains, and it didn't take long before she became a role model and leader for other girls and young women. In fact, Fatima won an award for the Best Volunteer! And all of her hard-work and success has meant she's ready and confident to enter the workforce, using all of the skills she's learnt through the program!

*We've changed Fatima's name to protect her identity.

Challenging and changing the perception of women and gender— a word from Shani Cain

"The Business Brains program embodies the way in which the not-for-profit sector should be moving – essentially it is working ourselves out of a job and ensuring the community and program itself are sustainable without external influence and support.

"The impact of the program extends far beyond the participants on the program and this once again highlights the need to amplify [the voices of] women and girls. When you educate, up-skill and invest in women, the whole community benefits. Ultimately, the biggest thing that stays with me through this report is that it is challenging and changing the perception of women and gender.

"This is essential in enhancing the status of women and girls across the globe. This program is something for more programs to aspire to."

– Shani Cain, CEO, Oaktree

OF COURSE, IT'S NOT ALL SUNSHINE AND RAINBOWS

No study-and-learn piece ever comes back with a perfect score and as much as we love to be gushed over, we also really wanted to hear about the areas where Business Brains could be improved. We are always learning, always growing and will never be content with sticking to the status quo. Here's a few themes that came out of the Business Brains study that will be taken into consideration for the next phase of the program.

Not all pilots take off

In late 2018, we decided to trial a girls' loans and savings scheme (GLOSS) in four communities, involving a mix of bank and village loans, to help several members of the Girls' Club get their businesses off the ground. While a small sample of participants were initially chosen to test the effectiveness of the loan system before expanding, there was not enough clarity around the selection process for the pilot which led to some jealousy and discontent among the girls.

This experience has taught us that there needs to be a stronger focus on making sure communities truly understand the concept of a pilot program and are in agreement with what it entails. We will be putting an extra focus on including community members in the design of pilots, as well as running comprehensive education sessions, so everyone is on board before we launch.

We need to address the tough stuff

While Business Brains deals with sexual and reproductive health and rights and impresses upon all participants the importance of girls and women having complete autonomy over her own body, it does not directly deal with sexual or gender-based violence. Yet considering the extremely high rates of sexual violence — in February 2019, the President of Sierra Leone, Julius Maada Bio, declared a national emergency due to the high rates of rape of female minors — and its link with girls' education and rights, it's become evident that we need to make this a key component of the program.

We're not ones to sit idly by when there's work to be done, so we have already reviewed this and have just finalised the adaptation of a new manual on sexual and gender-based violence with thanks to the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) and Restless Development, which will become part of the training *round of applause*.

Sexual violence also shows its face in different forms that were mentioned during the study by participants, including child marriage, teen pregnancy and female genital mutilation (FGM). FGM is commonly practiced in Sierra Leone as a rite of passage into womanhood. Estimates vary but some suggest that about 90% of women and girls aged 15 to 49 in the country have undergone FGM.

Given sexual violence is so prevalent and such a taboo to talk about, there may be opportunities for Business Brains to engage with other developmental organisations (global and local) with expertise in this area who could offer training to local staff or even give talks to schools and communities.

Subconsciously following social norms

Social and cultural norms are complex and can rear their often-damaging heads even amongst those who are working hard to fight against them. An example of this related to dress codes for Girls' Club members. Although not part of the official program curriculum, dress codes were often encouraged as facilitators were trying to establish a sense of self-confidence in the members, and being well-dressed and groomed is part of a socio-cultural norm for many Sierra Leonean communities.

However, the message being unintentionally taught was that unless a girl follows the dress code, she won't have the respect of her community and will attract unwanted attention from men. In other words, wearing "inappropriate clothes" meant the girl — and not the man — was to blame for her lack of safety. This completely goes against everything we stand for and we will be looking for ways around this issue by further exploring cross-cultural intersections relating to sexual violence against women to help address such complex ingrained cultural beliefs.

A question of gender

"Why isn't there a Boys' Club?" Although Business Brains engages with boys through the in-school class curriculum and with men in the wider community, our program doesn't have specific male-focused clubs and groups, like it does with girls. This can lead to some frustration from men and boys within communities, who believe they should be more involved to maintain a "gender balance". However, when asked how their involvement would achieve equal gender balance, many responses reverted back to the ingrained stereotype that women are less intelligent than men.

For example, one boy commented that "boys are stronger and smarter than [girls] and we should be in the club too to make the club stronger". These comments highlight that although there is some basic knowledge of the term "gender equality", there is a lack of true understanding of what it means in practice. It emphasised that in order to create a platform for girls' leadership and voice, we must increase our engagement with men and boys with care, to make sure there's support for the program, to avoid backlash, and to challenge these notions.

IT'S ONLY GONNA GET BIGGER AND BETTER

This study confirmed that challenging the status quo to help girls succeed beyond getting an education is not only possible – it's happening right now. We get so excited whenever we read results like these, because it tells us that our theories, our people and our passion are all aligned and we are truly making a difference. The only way from here is up and we've already got some big plans in the pipeline to make Business Brains an unstoppable juggernaut of girls' worldwide domination.

We're expanding!

Plans are already underway for new recruitment to our Girls' Clubs, but in this next phase, we'll be doing things a little differently. We are going to recruit 200 girls who were forced to drop out of school due to poverty, teenage pregnancy or other circumstances, and support those who want to, to return to school. However, we will also recruit 100 girls who have dropped out but don't wish to return to school, and offer them an alternative vocational pathway. We want to make sure all girls are supported in and out of the classroom to break the cycle of poverty.

We're rolling out Business Brains to 25 new schools in addition to our existing 20 schools in order to offer the program to not just One Girl Scholars, but to their entire year levels too which will allow us to reach so many more students. We're also tweaking it to be more appropriate for the target audience. For example, senior students will focus on career development to help them make better decisions about career pathways. Junior students will focus on life skills, sexual and reproductive health and menstrual hygiene management.

Girls' voices will only get louder

The primary goal of the new phase of the program is for young women to have a voice to make decisions about their own lives in an environment where they can access necessary opportunities and information. There will be a specific focus on leadership and confidence-building with opportunities to do public speaking, lead the clubs and participate in radio discussions on issues important to young women and girls. An incredible way we are doing this is to give the alumni of our Scholarship program the opportunity to lead the program. We have already trained up 20 of these inspiring change-makers to lead the program in their former high schools. What an amazing example of giving back and creating a full circle!

They can't be what they can't see — so we're showing them

We are going to expand the number of female teachers, volunteers and guardians involved in the program, so the girls can see firsthand what a strong female leader looks like. By recruiting mothers of students and other women for these roles, they will not only benefit from trainings and loan schemes themselves but also help them to support the younger generation of girls in school, advocating for them to the wider community. Additionally, we are making sure that we strengthen the existing One Girl women's committees and female teacher scholars and allow them to lead in the program. By integrating these co-existing initiatives, we will promote a holistic approach that builds the capacity of leading females throughout all our programs.

Girls are going to rise above traditional female pathways!

A major focus of the new program is on challenging the traditional gendered pathways that girls are siloed into. We are transforming our Girls' Clubs to make sure these young women also have technical skills that will allow them to surpass the generational poverty and inequality experienced by their mothers, aunts, and sisters. By conducting in-depth research, networking with private sector and other vocational institutes, we will hone in on a few sectors for these young women to complete technical training and then transition to decent jobs.

We're gonna have more fun

We are talking to teenagers, after all! No matter how beneficial Business Brains is, we know we're going to lose our audience if we don't keep the program youth-focused, engaging and creative. That's why we're going to frame the lessons to use more inquiry-based learning, moving away from traditional learning methods and challenging the power dynamic between teacher and student to become more of an exchange and sharing experience.

SOME LAST WORDS

Educating girls is beyond doubt the best chance we have of ending worldwide poverty. It makes sense not just from an economic point of view, but from human rights and environmental perspectives too. The world gets a bit better for everyone every time a girl is educated. However, we have to think more broadly about the reasons girls have been excluded from education for so long and how these reasons continue to cause girls to drop out of school today.

Business Brains is filling that need. It's the bulldozer knocking down the issues that could block her pathway when she most needs to concentrate on her studies and her future. It's the bus bringing everyone in her community along for the ride, so they feel empowered to be part of the change and support her every step of the way. It's the top-down, bright yellow convertible that tells her she is strong, she is worth it, she is in control of her own body and she can create the future she wants for herself.

It's a vehicle for her success. All aboard!



ONE GIRL