

SIA HULIA POSUWAA

EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN TO MAKE A CHANGE

Sia Hulia Posuwaa like many other young Sierra Leonean women had to drop out of school due to their family's inability to pay school expenses and support the family by engaging in some trade. In Sierra Leonean culture, girls are trained how to cook while men are allowed to play and focus on education. This unfortunate situation however would allow Sia to bake and sell pastries such as banana bread while hawking the streets of Koidu for years.

As the More Than A Woman project implemented by SEND Sierra Leone with funds from Irish Aid expanded across the Eastern region of Sierra Leone, radio programs were organized as a means to disseminate information. It was after one of such radio programs called "Women on the Move" that Sia's life would change for the better. Her mother after listening to the radio program encouraged her to seek more information as the initiative highlighted supporting young women in entrepreneurship, politics and leadership. Convinced that her life could be beyond hawking, Sia participated in the VSLA training sessions organized by SEND Sierra Leone and subsequently joined a VSLA in her community. Months passed and Sia was faithful in making her weekly savings contributions to her VSLA from the proceeds of her hawking business.

Proud of the savings she had been able to make in her VSLA, Sia requested and was granted a loan of \$200 which she invested into purchasing a refrigerator for the sale of cold soft drinks and



Fig 1. HULIA BAR AND RESTAURANT IS SITUATED ON THE MAIN ROAD IN KOIDU CITY

locally made beverages. This investment would prove to be the first of many, as Sia retired from hawking and found a profitable venture in the sale of cold drinks within her community as she was the only vendor of cold drinks. After successfully repaying her \$200 loan and increasing her weekly savings contributions, Sia decided to move her business out of the family house and rent a store located by the road to attract more customers. The rental of the store was financed by another loan from her VSLA as Sia became a reliable creditor due to her consistent repayment and increasing personal savings in the VSLA account. With the store, Sia again decided to capitalize on her cooking skills and open a restaurant to complement the sale of cold drinks. This expansion would lead to Sia becoming an icon for young women's empowerment in Koidu as her growth was visible for all to see. Her entrepreneurial training from SEND Sierra Leone proved to be essential as she now had a thriving business.

COVID-19 and the resulting lockdowns and restrictions on interactions and movements of the population in Sierra Leone threatened the gains Sia and her restaurant- "Hulia Bar and Restaurant" had made. Due to her innovation training, Sia decided to use technology to cater for her existing customers and to reach out to new customers by creating social media groups for Hulia Bar and Restaurant on WhatsApp messaging platform. By doing this Sia's customers would be able to make orders through WhatsApp and receive their orders through dispatch riders. This innovation allowed Sia to protect her income and keep the business thriving. To lower the cost of the restaurant and increase the income of the VSLA, Sia is an off taker of her VSLA's farm which harvests vegetables such as cabbage, carrots and cucumber therefore providing an assured market for the group's harvest.

Dedicated to ensuring that she is also able to impact the lives of other young women, Sia has employed two young women who just like her dropped out of school due to lack of finances. She encourages these two women to use the VSLA to aspire to be better by saving enough to access loans which can be used to pay for their education. These two women are proud members of the VSLA and are making diligent payments under Sia's stewardship.

"I am currently the proud proprietor of a successful restaurant. I am grateful to Irish Aid and SEND Sierra Leone for the More Than A Woman project that has had such a positive impact on my life. I've been able to provide for myself in a sustainable manner. My ambition is to grow my company and help other young women " Sia expressed happily.



Fig 2. Two customers receive their meal at Hulia Bar and Restaurant



Fig 3. Hulia and one of her assistants preparing the daily meals for sale