

# IMPROVING POSITIVE YOUTH OUTCOMES THROUGH THE USE OF SAFE SPACES IN LOW-AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES



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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical period of physical and social transitions, one that provides a window of opportunity for learning, acquiring skills, and developing critical thinking. Events that occur during this time have a lasting influence on an individual's life trajectory. (Petersen 1988) Creation of a safe space has been identified as essential for effective positive youth development programs that, when intentionally integrated into program design, can improve both youth and development outcomes. Safe spaces are defined to be "physical or virtual spaces which enable youth, to come together and freely express themselves without judgment or fear of retribution." (UNFPA 2015) These physical or virtual zones can be a powerful platform within positive youth development programs to develop core life skills, form friendships, receive and give peer support, increase social networks, and receive mentoring from trusted adults.

Safe spaces can fulfill a variety of needs for youth. Civic spaces enable youth to engage in governance issues; public spaces afford youth the opportunity to participate in sports and other leisure activities in the community; digital spaces help youth interact virtually across borders with everyone; and well-planned physical spaces can help accommodate the needs of diverse

**Positive Youth Development** engages youth along with their families, communities and/or governments so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential. PYD approaches build skills, assets, and competencies; foster healthy relationships; strengthen the environment; and transform systems.

youth, especially those vulnerable to marginalization or violence. Safe spaces also address the needs of children. Humanitarian agencies use child-friendly safe spaces to increase children's access to safe environments and promote their psychosocial well-being. (World Vision and the International Federation of the Red Cross 2019) This type of safe space is a child-centered place, where children can come together to play, relax, express themselves, feel supported, and learn skills to deal with the challenges they face within their context.

Many programs implemented in low-and middle-income countries incorporate the safe space feature into positive youth development (PYD) activities. A systematic review of PYD programs in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) found that, although the number of evaluations is limited, PYD programs have resulted in positive outcomes across sectors, including



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improved knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to positive shifts in gender norms; on employment, skills development, and financial behaviors; and on sexual and reproductive health (SRH). (Alvarado et al. 2017) Programs with positive results for these sector-specific outcomes use safe spaces to teach transferable soft skills and competencies, foster self-confidence, self-efficacy, and leadership as well as engage with numerous stakeholders across multiple settings, including schools, households, and community centers. Most evaluations focused on sector-specific outcomes (e.g., human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), SRH, workforce development) rather than outcomes across multiple sectors. The purpose of this brief is to discuss the characteristics of safe spaces and evaluate their success in contributing to positive youth outcomes in LMICs across sectors.

### **What are the key characteristics of safe spaces currently being implemented?**

The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) highlight a range of characteristics of safe spaces that have been identified in the literature that are transferrable across youth development programs:

#### **I. Ensure Physical and Psychological Safety**

Creating and maintaining physical and psychological safety is an important feature of positive youth development programs, particularly when targeting vulnerable or marginalized populations. Having a psychologically and physically safe space is linked with violence reduction and capacity-building for civic engagement. (Alvarado et al 2017) On a foundational level, a safe place requires physical safety, an environment free from violence that allows for educational and learning experiences. The safe space must be located in an area that is conveniently accessible to youth and assures safety and privacy. Feeling safe is also about establishing a trusting environment fostered by supportive relationships between adult staff and youth participants. Safe spaces can provide youth with an emotionally and physically safe environment to learn new things, share their ideas with peers, express their feelings and manage conflict. Psychological safety describes a climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves. Youth who feel that their input and involvement are important, valued, and heard will feel safe to engage in programs more fully. For example, youth are more willing to make comments and suggestions if they do not fear being ridiculed. (Eccles and Gootman, 2002)

#### **2. Clear and Consistent Rules and Expectations**

Appropriately structured programs (e.g., clear rules and expectations set, proper supervision, etc.) enable young people to operate within boundaries and to respect rules, ultimately leading to secure and positive youth. Establishing ground rules helps provide a supportive environment that increase safe peer group interactions and decrease confrontational peer exchanges or bullying.

#### **3. Opportunities for Skill Building**

Safe spaces also serve as a vehicle for participants to receive education and training on a variety of topics. Such program content is typically multilayered, with components such as sports, literacy training, sexual and reproductive health education, gender-based violence awareness education, financial literacy and savings education, ND awareness of gender norms and harmful masculinity. (Baldwin 2011; Marcus et al. 2017; UNFPA 2015) A growing body of evidence documents the importance of soft skills in predicting long-term life outcomes, including improved employment, education, and sexual and reproductive health outcomes. (Kautz et al. 2014) Soft skills, also known as life skills, socio-emotional skills, and transferable skills, among other terms, refer to a broad set of skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that enable people to navigate their environment effectively, build good relationships, perform well, and achieve their goals. Three critical soft skills — positive self-concept, self-control, and higher order thinking skills — have been found to increase positive youth outcomes across workforce development, violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health. (Lippman 2015) Research also shows that participation in sports-based programs potentially develops and improves the interpersonal skills of youth such as leadership, character, confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth. (Grassroots Soccer 2018)

#### **4. Supportive Relationships**

Typical activities within safe spaces are organized around socializing, building social networks, and social support systems. (UNFPA 2015) Community-based programs are typically implemented by mentors who belong to the same community as the participants and with whom youth can identify. (Baldwin 2011) School-based clubs are often led by a teacher or an external facilitator, such as an older peer or community member. (Baldwin 2011; Marcus et al. 2017) While adult-led educational activities are the most frequently implemented within PYD programs, many promising programs enlist youth to work alongside adults, serving as peer mentors,

leading community discussion activities, and creating youth-friendly safe spaces. (Alvarado et al. 2017)

## 5. Opportunities to Belong and Make a Difference

Connecting with diverse youth, building interpersonal relationships and creating a space made for youth allows a sense of belonging to develop. Programs that provide youth a safe space to share and listen to each other, participate in decision-making processes, work together to accomplish a goal, offer positive feedback and have opportunities to design and lead program activities cultivate an inclusive environment. Research highlights the importance of social interactions and belonging in a social network in fostering positive identity development (The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). However, there are major gaps in the inclusion of marginalized youth, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, transgender, and intersex (LGBTQI) youth, youth with disabilities, and youth in conflict or politically unstable settings within PYD programs. (Alvarado 2017). Deliberate attention to these groups is crucial to ensure these marginalized youth are provided with opportunities to develop alongside their peers. A successful strategy for many safe spaces, largely implemented either as community-based or school-based programs is to specifically reach out to these groups and target programming that meets their need. However, far more can also be done to intentionally engage youth in the design and implementation of safe spaces as well as address harmful gender norms that impact development outcomes.

## What is the Impact of Safe Spaces Across Sectors?

Safe spaces are used in a wide range of programs focused in education, conflict affected environments, health, economic empowerment, violence prevention, mental health, gender equality, and civic engagement. Evidence suggests that the establishment of safe spaces can help promote life skills, encourage financial savings, promote women's protection and empowerment, promote civic engagement, help mitigate risk of gender-based violence and improve health behaviors. Examples of programs that use safe spaces are summarized below and highlight that safe spaces can be used to intentionally develop cross-sectoral programs.

### Gender Norms

Increasingly popular as a tool for achieving gender equality and empowerment, youth clubs provide a comfortable space for youth to share and build skills across sectors. The Gender and Adolescence: Global

Evidence (GAGE) consortium reviewed 63 studies on the empowerment impacts of 44 girls or youth development clubs and found **substantial evidence of the positive impact of girls club programs that provide safe spaces, awareness-raising skills training, and peer support on girls' self-confidence and self-efficacy.** ( Marcus et al. 2017) GAGE found that nearly 75 percent of these programs changed gender discriminatory attitudes and practice. Programs focused on changing gender norms are more likely to be successful when they involved the broader community (i.e., parents and other family members) and used strategies such as awareness raising campaigns, community outreach, and home visits. (Marcus et al. 2017)

### Adolescent and Youth Reproductive Health

Girls clubs have a strong positive impact **on expanding knowledge and improving attitudes towards reproductive health issues.** (Marcus et al. 2017) Programs tend to focus on providing information in youth-friendly spaces on contraception and HIV primarily, but some provide information on menstruation and puberty as well. (Marcus et al. 2017) **Group discussions were particularly effective in improving reproductive health knowledge.** However, there was **mixed evidence supporting behavior change, particularly around contraceptive uptake.** While some programs **showed an increase in uptake, in other instances these shifts did not translate into behavioral changes as girls often lacked the power to shift entrenched gender norms.** (Marcus et al. 2017) A few programs, such as Biruh Tesfa, **demonstrated improved uptake of family planning methods, contraceptive use, couples negotiation on reproductive health issues, and HIV testing.** (Edmeades et al. 2014) Biruh Tesfa also demonstrated that the girls that received both the economic empowerment and the adolescent and youth reproductive health program had greater changes in outcome than those who received only one type of sector-specific intervention.

### HIV

Safe spaces have been integral in comprehensive HIV prevention efforts in LMICS. Stepping Stones is a gender-transformative, group- and community-based initiative designed to reduce both HIV transmission and intimate partner violence (IPV) by increasing sexual and reproductive health knowledge, communication skills, and awareness of gender inequity through small group sessions and promoting communication between genders and generations in larger meetings. (Jewkes et

al. 2008) Stepping Stones encourages participation from the whole community by inviting people to self-assemble into small, single-gender groups with a limited age range (ages 16-23), irrespective of HIV status or other marginalized identities. Structuring groups by gender and age is thought to promote trust, facilitate sharing, and strengthen peer networks. Small groups work through 18 facilitated, participatory learning sessions in parallel. All groups come together in safe spaces in two workshop meetings to compare and contrast experiences across genders and generations. Reflections, experiences, and future plans are shared with the wider community at three community meetings. Long-term findings from the Stepping Stones intervention include **reduced physical and sexual partner violence at two years follow up, and reduced substance abuse at one year follow up.** (Jewkes et al. 2008)

The Collaborative HIV Adolescent Mental Health Programme (CHAMPSA) is an HIV prevention program aimed to strengthen family relationships as well as target peer influences in 10 (90 minute) sessions delivered by community caregivers to families over 10 weekends. (Bell et al. 2008) The intervention is typically delivered through multi-level group modalities, which include both multiple family sessions and separate parent/child group sessions. The sessions often comprise participatory activities and experiential learning activities to increase HIV knowledge and family and peer support. Group sessions also serve as safe forums through which to build alliances and encourage intergenerational conversations that improve intra-familial communication and drive social norm change. These sessions develop skills and knowledge using a culturally and developmentally appropriate manualized curriculum. Life skills curricula include multi-session workshops or discussion groups, with set curricula within manuals covering a range of topics, including HIV knowledge, healthy relationships, parent-adolescent communication, parental monitoring, and peer influences. The program found **significant increases in HIV transmission knowledge, less stigma toward people infected with HIV, and increased caregiver monitoring, communication, and comfort.** (Bell, et al. 2008)

Grassroot Soccer's sport-based programming in South Africa empowers girls to seek sexual and reproductive health services and provides a safe space to address sexuality and relationship issues as well as harmful gender norms, and to learn about the social and structural drivers of violence against women and girls. Their SKILLZ Health for Girls program provides a platform for young girls to develop their soccer skills and participate in a sport seen as a male domain,

while building critical life skills, a sense of solidarity, and providing support in a team environment that is affirming and encouraging of pro-social behavior. A mixed-method longitudinal study found that the **program improved self-efficacy, and decision making, while disclosure of violence doubled from baseline to endline.** (Grassroots Soccer, 2018) Similarly, the SKILLZ Guyz program, a sport-based SRH and life skills program for adolescent males in Nigeria aims to improve gender equitable attitudes, build self-efficacy and self-esteem, and increase knowledge about HIV, SRH, and health services among participants. The intervention, delivered to in-school and out-of-school males ages 13 to 19, was implemented by trained male facilitators ("Coaches") who imparted accurate information, created a safe environment for discussion, and acted as positive role models for participants. A mixed method quasi-experimental study found that the program demonstrated **significant increases in HIV knowledge, pregnancy and contraceptive knowledge, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and gender equitable attitudes.** (Akanegbu et al. 2019)

Social media platforms, including mobile technologies and social networking sites, are also increasingly being used as a "safe space" in HIV prevention and treatment efforts and adolescent youth and reproductive health (Bastawrous and Armstrong 2013; Guse et al. 2012; Muessig et al. 2015). Although stigma and cultural context may prevent people living with HIV/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and at-risk populations from accessing in-person HIV prevention and treatment initiatives (Mahajan et al. 2008), social media can offer a neutral platform for engagement. For example, the common benefits to using social media to communicate about HIV that were reported within studies from a systematic review are information access, enhanced ability to communicate, anonymity, a sense of social and emotional support, an established virtual community, and geographical reach. (Taggart et al 2015) Additionally, the increased social support provided by social media has been shown to improve treatment adherence and access to HIV testing, prevention services, and assist with coping with HIV-related stigma. (Hailey and Arscott 2013) Social media use among key populations affected by the HIV epidemic (e.g., LGBTQI individuals, men who have sex with men, racial and ethnic minorities, and adolescents) is increasing. Additional research with follow up and longer-term measurement of behavioral outcomes will provide a more robust evidence base from which to judge the effectiveness of new digital media in changing adolescent risk behavior and reproductive health and risk behavior.

## **Violence Prevention**

Providing a safe space for men and boys to challenge masculine stereotypes and build positive, nonviolent coping mechanisms and a sense of community can help to prevent their use of violence. Promundo's Program H ('H' for hombre) began in Brazil and has been adapted and implemented in more than 34 countries on five continents and translated into over 10 languages. The program centers on critical discussions about gender norms with men (ages 15-24) and encourages the transformation of harmful gender roles. Quasi-experimental studies have found evidence of positive changes among program participants from more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors generally to improved couple communication, reduced gender-based violence, and improved attitudes around caregiving. (Ricardo et al. 2010) Impact evaluation studies in Brazil and India have found that after participating in Program H activities, young men have reported greater acceptance of domestic work as men's responsibility, improved relationships with their friends and sexual or intimate partners, higher rates of condom use and lower rates of sexual harassment and violence against women. (Pulerwitz et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2007)

The UNFPA has also focused on safe spaces during a refugee crisis, specifically those fleeing Syria. With partners in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, UNFPA established women and girls safe spaces (WGSS) designed to empower women and girls impacted by the crisis. UNFPA laid out a list of key objectives for safe spaces, as well as guiding principles for making them successful. The objectives focused on support for women and girls through social networks; skill building; and access to psychological, medical and legal information and services. (UNFPA 2015) The guiding principles suggest these spaces should provide leadership and empowerment activities for women and girls, promote client/survivor-centered design, be safe and accessible, involve the community, be coordinated and multi-sectoral, and be tailored to the context. Overall, a positive, nurturing educational environment that offers a safe space has been shown to mitigate violence and help in youth development.

## **Mental Health**

Schools are one of the most important settings for promoting the mental health of adolescents in safe spaces, as they provide a forum for advancing social and emotional competence as well as academic learning. Mental health promotion and universal prevention interventions designed for school-going adolescents range in focus from the development of social,

emotional, problem-solving, and coping skills to mental health promotion, combined with sexuality education or physical fitness programs. (Barry et al. 2013) Most of the school-based life skills and resilience programs in LMICs indicate positive effects on students' self-esteem, motivation, and self-efficacy, though there are differential effects for gender and age groups. (Mason-Jones et al. 2012)

Programs incorporating life skills, social and emotional learning, and early interventions to address emotional and behavioral problems, produce long-term benefits for young people, including **improved emotional and social functioning, positive health behaviors, and improved academic performance**. Examples of interventions with moderate- to high-quality evidence include a family-based strengthening program (Familias Fuertes) for parents and their adolescent children, which use multiple family groups within safe spaces to promote consistent discipline, parental monitoring, and positive communication patterns with local nurses trained as facilitators. (Vasquez et al. 2010)

## **Education**

In the educational domain, programs with safe spaces have been more successful in **increasing school enrollment, attendance, and enhancing soft-skills** as compared to improving educational attainment. (Marcus et al. 2017) For example, the Ishraq program in rural Egypt focused on creating safe spaces for out-of-school girls to learn, increase their literacy, and promote positive social norms related to their abilities and life opportunities. The program consisted of literacy training, a life-skills curriculum, and sports activities to enhance leadership and team-building skills and prepare girls for integration into formal schooling. At the community level, the program sought to change gender norms and community perceptions about girls' roles in society. Community-engagement efforts worked simultaneously with adolescent boys, parents, and community leaders, such as priests, imams, physicians, and government health and education officials, to raise awareness of issues important to girls, advocate for the Ishraq program and girls, and assist girls in accessing local village services (e.g., banking, school, etc.). For girls, **program participation improved literacy, developed life skills, increased self-confidence, led to greater mobility and community participation, changed attitudes and behaviors, and built solidarity and social support among girls** who have traditionally been socially isolated. (Brady et al. 2007; Selim et al. 2013)

Girls-only safe spaces programs can also be effective at improving literacy and health-seeking behavior among the most marginalized girls who otherwise lack educational opportunities and access to services. In Ethiopia, Biruh Tesfa (Bright Future, in Amharic) aimed to improve the economic, sexual, and reproductive health outcomes for girls who are or have been married by combining safe space groups led by mentors with community engagement. Girls received training in literacy and life skills, and they were given vouchers for medical services. A longitudinal study was conducted to measure changes in girls' learning outcomes and their use of health services. The program found girls in the project target area who had never attended school had significantly higher literacy scores than the girls in the control site. At endline, girls in the project site were 1.6 times more likely to have used a health service in the past six months than those in the control site.

### Economic Empowerment

Community-based programs are more likely to include economic empowerment components, such as vocational training, financial literacy education, saving groups and loans, and entrepreneurship training for older girls (Marcus et al. 2017). Overall, the programs were successful in **improving adolescents' economic well-being, especially the less marginalized** (e.g., those that were older, married, or in a stable environment) as is seen from the success of programs such as Tap and Reposition Youth (TRY), a program focused on micro-credit and saving groups for out-of-school youth. (Erulkar et al. 2006) Financial literacy education and savings schemes led to increased savings across all age cohorts. A desk review of gender-intentional programs for girls and young women found that a safe space contributed to educational attainment, livelihood, and employment outcomes. (Martin et al. 2019) Safe spaces provided an important venue to discuss the myriad of factors that influence youth education and workforce success, including contextual factors such as gender-based discrimination and violence, and unpaid care responsibilities. A study of different multi-component intervention packages for delaying marriage and childbirth in Kenya found that girls who actively participated in the safe spaces intervention, where strategies involved life skills training for health and wealth creation, experienced greater health and wealth outcomes in addition to the positive education outcomes. This finding implies that participating in girls' groups with combined health and economic content had spillover effects onto their educational attainment. (Austrian et al. 2018)

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, safe spaces are an important feature of positive youth development programs in which adolescent boys and girls can build their social networks, receive social support, acquire contextually relevant skills, and access and receive information related to a variety of issues (e.g., women's rights, health, financial literacy, gender-based violence, and services). Programs that use safe spaces have demonstrated impact across outcomes in education, violence, workforce development, mental health, SRH, and HIV. More intentional efforts are needed to use safe spaces to design and implement cross-sectoral positive youth development outcomes and target different domains of empowerment.

Recommendations for how program implementers can improve programming for youth by leveraging safe spaces for cross-sectoral programming include:

- **Build the social capital of youth in ways that enhance their capabilities and reinforce broader programmatic aims.** Youth-led activities and peer support groups within safe spaces can improve social networks, enable girls and young women to share their experiences with their peers, help youth to gain confidence by practicing emerging leadership skills, and enhance youth's access to information across sectors.
- **Provide practical learning opportunities within safe spaces for youth to reinforce the variety of soft skills acquired.** Young people learn by doing. Participants will require a range of opportunities to build and practice new skills and competencies, as well as support for their continued development. Research found that core soft skills (i.e., positive self-concept; self-control; and higher-order thinking skills) create positive outcomes across important areas of youth's lives, including workforce success, violence prevention, and RH. Programs can be intentionally designed to use safe spaces to focus on or include these core set of skills to improve outcomes across these three domains of youth development.
- **Use social media as a virtual safe space.** Virtual safe spaces are particularly important for marginalized populations to explore sensitive issues such as reproductive health, sexuality, gender, stigma, and discrimination.
- **Develop inclusive PYD programs for vulnerable and marginalized populations.** Youth live at the intersections of various marginalized identities, which may include their

race, gender identity and expression, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, ability, and more. However, programs which use safe spaces may not be reaching the most marginalized populations including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex youth, and people with disabilities. Creating truly inclusive PYD programs requires going beyond outreach or community engagement. It requires an analysis of the existing social, economic, physical, and normative barriers and needs of youth faced in their communities (Ricker & Adams, 2019). After determining why certain groups are excluded, program implementers can determine what can be done differently in order for inclusion to take place.

- **Ensure youth design, lead, and manage the safe space.** Active participation of youth in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs can empower them to play a vital role in decisions that inform youth-focused programs in ways that could ultimately result in improved outcomes. Youth can identify core values to be upheld in space, set group norms and expectations, implement a conflict resolution process and lead activities.
- **Engage men and boys in program design and implementation.** Boys are often targeted as stakeholders to enhance outcomes for girls, but there is a need to include them as partners and address their needs as well to have better outcomes for girls and boys. Engaging men and boys intentionally in safe spaces to identify, discuss, and challenge inequitable gender norms and traditional notions of masculinity and femininity and practice positive forms of communication and healthy relationship skills is critical to transforming harmful gender norms in order to improve positive youth outcomes.
- **Develop gender transformative PYD programs in order to improve youth outcomes.** Far more can be done to address gender in addition to or beyond the traditional approach of including women and girls only. Reflective group education and dialogue within safe spaces can provide opportunities for girls and boys to increase their awareness and an opportunity to reflect on gender norms and patriarchy in their communities. Through these dialogues, it is important to explore, question, and transform harmful gender norms that can increase the risk of negative youth outcomes.

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 YouthPowerLearning

USAID YouthPower Learning generates and disseminates knowledge about the implementation and impact of positive youth development (PYD) and cross-sectoral approaches in international development. The project leads research, evaluations, and events designed to build the evidence base related to PYD. Concurrently, YouthPower Learning employs expertise in learning and knowledge sharing to promote engagement and inform the global community about how to successfully help transition young people into productive, healthy adults. YouthPower Learning supports the implementation of the 2012 USAID Youth in Development Policy to improve capacity and enable the aspirations of youth so that they can contribute to, and benefit from, more stable, democratic, and prosperous communities.

This brief is made possible by the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of Making Cents International through YouthPower: Evidence and Evaluation Task Order 1 (YouthPower Learning) AID Contract # AID-OAA-I-15-00034/AID-OAA-TO-15-00011. This brief does not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.