**Gloria Schultz:** You are listening to the PYD Lab. (Music plays)

The podcast for implementers and young leaders, who want to examine innovative approaches to Positive Youth Development and hear stories of young people leading change in their communities.

This podcast is made possible by the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development or USAID.

The content and opinions expressed in this podcast do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government. (Music cuts out)

**Natasha Zena:** Hey. It's Natasha and you're in the PYD lab. Now, for those of you who are new, you may be thinking to yourself, ‘hmm. What is PYD?’ PYD stands for Positive Youth Development.

It's a philosophy and a programmatic approach for supporting healthy, productive and engaged youth as they grow into adulthood.

The PYD approach rests on the idea that youth with developmental assets are more likely to enjoy things like academic success, have greater economic prospects, they'll be more civically engaged, which ultimately aids them in being healthy in the long term.

Well, now that we got that out of the way, let's hop into this week's episode. (Music continues)

Welcome. Today we're in the lab with young changemaker Cynthia Nyongesa and Mari-Lisa Njenga of Generation Unlimited.

We'll be exploring the issues women and girls still face and why safe spaces for girls are so important.

So, how do we change the narrative that young women are still receiving?

There's a clinical definition for safe spaces and I’ll get to that in a moment, but safe spaces is a term that has been gaining in popularity over the last few years and it's a place that young women can go to be their authentic selves.

Where they can access resources such as education and training but other components equally crucial to their development, like positive identity reinforcement and camaraderie.

Research says that safe spaces allow youth to connect with others who may be facing similar experiences and challenges and as a consequence can lead to healing, empowerment and resilience.

So, back to that clinical definition of safe spaces, according to Oxford a safe space is a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment or any other emotional or physical harm.

Cynthia Nyongesa knows firsthand the benefits of safe spaces. In fact, it was the safe space provided to her while in high school that helped build her confidence.

While today the 25-year-old Kenyan is a passionate storyteller who amplifies the voices of other young change makers in Africa on her digital platform *Cynthia* *Untamed, m*any years ago, she was just a young girl who needed a little extra nurturing and a safe space to come into her own.

What were some of the other messages you feel like some of your peers received in their community?

**Cynthia Nyongesa:** Yes. When I was growing up a lot of young people were told that they could not be anything that they wanted to be in life. Especially people who were not performing well in class.

For the women they would be told that their work was just to staying at home, taking care of the household and even if they did well in class, they were always reminded that you know you still have to be a good wife.

And rarely did I hear the boys being told you have to be a good husband. I remember women used to be told pray for your husband, but nobody would tell the boys to pray for their wives.

**Natasha Zena:** Who was Cynthia when she was 10 and what did she dream of being when she grew up?

**Cynthia Nyongesa:** Well Cynthia at the age of 10 was a very different kind of a person.

She was a girl who was extremely brilliant, extremely gifted in class, always at the top of her class but she was not the most confident person.

And it's because I would have my hair shaven, shaven with scissors and people would make fun of me, people would tell me I looked like a boy.

I was a very tiny girl, quite a tiny girl and people would laugh at me and so that took away my confidence, it took away my ability to dream that I could be an important person in life. And I remember for me I wanted to be a teacher because I used to see a lot of teachers nurturing young children like me wanting them to be the best in life.

And for me my teachers liked me because I was very brilliant in class. I was always at the top of my class. So, I really wanted to be a teacher so that I could nurture that gift and confidence in children, but as time evolved, I decided to be a neurosurgeon, I then went on to be a philosopher I kept changing my mind until I decided to study law at the University of Nairobi.

But in between, at 10 years old, I was also able to encounter a teacher who really built my confidence and told me that I could be a great woman in society and that's what has enabled me to thrive today.

**Natasha Zena:** It's wonderful that you know you were able to meet somebody who kind of really helped to build that confidence in you. You know so many young people don't always have access to that which we know is one of the benefits of having a safe space.

Now contrary to the images, the term safe spaces may conjure like after school programs and youth centers, and all those are accurate, by the way, in Cynthia’s case her safe space was as simple as a listening ear and an office.

Now, have you had the benefit of being in a safe space? Were you involved in any after-school programs or groups where it was a safe space and an enabling atmosphere?

**Cynthia Nyongesa:** The most significant safe space for me I think happened when I was in high school, when I was in from three.

Form three is your third year of high school here in Kenya and like I mentioned that I used to suffer from low self-esteem, a lot of self-loathing and I wasn't performing well in school at that point when I was in high school.

And I remember, I was so discouraged, and I thought that I would never be anything in life. But the deputy principal of our high school [at] that time, she's called Monika Kimay. She has moved. But I went to her and I opened up and I told her I think I have given up on my studies. I've given up on myself, I am done for.

And what was interesting was her commitment to empower girls. It was not just me that she was empowering, she would empower a lot of girls. Girls who are going even through, who are going through many more challenges than I was.

And she gave me a book called *Life Journeys Seeking Destiny: Conversations with High Achieving Women in Kenya.* It's written by Susan Githuku, and when she gave it to me, it was talking about the stories of inspiring and successful women in Kenya. She told me you can always read this book anytime you come and she opened her office as a safe space. And even when she was not there, she would leave the key with a school messenger and I would just ask for the key, enter her office, read a couple of stories and go back to class.

And as I constantly read those stories, they reinforced a message in me and told me, ‘Wow, you mean these women were actually going through the same challenges that I was?'

From low self-esteem to poor grades in school and now they are CEOs, they are chancellors of universities, they are journalists. So I thought wow, I can actually do it and she even helped me to come up with a study plan and I went back to the basics and I started studying again with more enthusiasm and with the inspiration of the book because now I saw a life beyond what I was beyond my grades.

I could see a life where I was a successful and inspiring woman in society and really that was a safe space and I wish that every girl had that kind of space in their life.

**Natasha Zena:** To me that's so powerful because I think oftentimes when we think of safe spaces, we think of you know, going to buildings and there's groups and there's you know, a bunch of facilitators. And the fact that she could create a safe space for you just inside of her office is super impactful, right?

It was a place that you knew that you could go, and you felt safe and you trusted her and that's just so important you know. A safe space doesn't have to be a big thing, it could be a little window that you create for somebody else.

**Cynthia Nyongesa:** Very true. Yes, I’d really just like to tell all the young people, men and women across the world, that you can be anything that you want to be in this life. Never allow anyone to tell you that you cannot make it, that you cannot be someone of value in society. You can be anything that you set your mind to. So always dream big.

**Natasha Zena:** I think that it is so wonderful. I totally agree with you.

Of course all of this is no surprise to Mari-Lisa Njenga. She's the Youth Engagement Officer at Generation Unlimited, a multi-stakeholder initiative that aims to ensure all young people are in school, training or employment by the year 2030.

While Generation Unlimited doesn't specialize in safe spaces, a lot of the awesome work they are doing naturally amplifies safe spaces for young women and those in marginalized communities.

When Lisa and I got together in the PYD Lab, we talked about the importance of leaders making space at the table for young voices.

What would you say are some key ingredients in creating a safe space for youth? A space where they feel like I could come, I can be my authentic self, and it's safe for me here?

**Lisa Njenga:** Young people need to not only be given a platform to speak but also given a seat at the decision-making table.

So, in Generation Unlimited, for example, we do have these governing bodies and within these governing bodies — I’m talking about board of trustees or the global leadership council — and, this is specifically for Generation Unlimited, but having young people sitting on these important decision-making bodies, that gives them a kind of platform where they feel like they are actually being valued.

And when I say young people, I mean I am talking about both men and women but I’m also talking about those young people from disadvantaged communities.

So, that's something that's very important. Just to encourage young people, to encourage young girls, young women to continue to speak out because once they do speak out then they can be kind of scouted to be one of those voices for young people within different decision-making bodies.

And that is now where they are safe to speak on what not only they need but young people within their communities need as well.

**Natasha Zena:** I loved what you said about the importance of making sure there's a seat at the table that's occupied by a young person so that they're involved in the decision making and their voice is at the table. But, we do know sometimes in the space as implementers go into communities to run some of these programs and head some of these safe spaces, they don't always look like the children that they're serving and so the youth don't always see people who look like them which we know is important to see yourself reflected back at you. As a person who specializes in youth engagement, what are some tips to engaging and connecting with youth despite some of those initial barriers for some of these implementers who are going into these communities?

**Lisa Njenga:** Thanks so much for that. I think one of the most important things when it comes to engaging young people within governance bodies in certain organizations or companies is making sure that you do have a representative of certain communities to be able to speak to the challenges that are actually, you know, felt by those young people within those different communities.

Within Generation Unlimited, our focus is to support young people within the most marginalized communities as such within our governance body, we do have young people from all of the continents and then from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Because as you've mentioned, it is not easy for a young person let's say from a rural community that would be able to understand the value of learning how to be a social entrepreneur from somebody who is basically has been living in an urban world.

You need that kind of balance where you talk about where you have these young people that at least have that kind of experience and then something else that is very important is that for us in Generation Unlimited like the young people within our governance structures, they are also leaders in their own communities and so they have the access and networks to the young people and from various backgrounds even within that community. Because you can be talking to some people and you'll find some people that are from a background where FGM (female genital mutilation) is still a thing like, it's still celebrated in their community or where women are not even allowed to speak or where you know sometimes women are the leaders.

And so, these young people within the governance structures have those networks and they have that access to those young people who are from various backgrounds and so leveraging that kind of network is very important because now you can now showcase those stories, create a sort of framework to be able to support them because you have that access to the people.

**Natasha Zena:** That's really some amazing work you're involved in so much. I loved that you talked a little bit about —when it comes to positive youth development — some of the assets that's needed right like education and training and such but then, you know, there's also this enabling environment component.

Women of different generations often face different challenges but unfortunately, sometimes we're still facing the same challenges we've been facing for the last 50 years. With the youth that you're working with, is the current generation still facing some of the challenges of their mothers’ generation? And if so, what are some of them?

**Lisa Njenga:** The youth that I’m working with first and foremost just to say they are amazing, and they are trying to break down, not just trying but actually doing it, break down these barriers that we have been facing especially within certain continents where I guess the emancipation of women's rights kind of took a bit of a lag to you know, to be actualized.

Young women, yes, are still facing a couple of issues that were still being faced back in the day but, for example, what I would say is the Generation Unlimited's Youth Challenge has brought out some ideas from young women across the globe that are trying um to curb some of the problems that their generations are still facing.

Other than that, young women are still not just young women, but women in general, um they're still trying to find a voice for themselves, right? And so we do have all of these movements that are being led by young people.

For example, Cynthia within our Generation Unlimited governance structure, she's part of the YPAT—the Young People’s Action Team. You know, she makes sure that um she amplifies the voices of young women of you know entrepreneurs, you know educationalists, showcasing to the world that women can do more than just be at home and make children you know.

So definitely it is an issue that we're still grappling with our generation, this new generation that's also coming up, they do have this empowerment you know or the opportunity to support us in moving forward.

**Natasha Zena:** Now it's time for the resource corner where we have a little fun with the PYD acronyms and change the ‘P’ to “Publish,” the ‘D’ to “Disrupt” while still keeping youth at the heart of it by focusing on young leaders.

Our guests recommend the latest resources for implementers to check out. The first is a published source, it could be a book, article, or report.

The second is a project led by a young leader and the third is a disruptive, innovative idea that does or will tackle a youth-related challenge. I asked Lisa for three recommendations, here's what she had to say.

So, the last part of our interview is your PYD recommendations.

**Lisa Njenga:** Thank you so much for that. My first recommendation would be UNICEF. It's a guideline.

What it is-is guidelines for adolescents' participation and civic engagement.

A lot of the time organizations try to reach out to young people and try to get them involved, however, this is not, it's not very easy to do so. And so, uh UNICEF did come up with this amazing guideline in which they actually consulted young people for these guidelines on youth participation and-and civic engagement.

Because especially when it um has to do with changing policies and ensuring that the youth voice is heard from a grassroot level to the global level, then young people need to have the tools to be able to actually relate these kinds of thoughts.

And so for them to have those tools, the older generation or the-the working generation, the professional generation right, needs to have a sort of guideline in terms of how can they actually get this information from the young people.

**Natasha Zena:** Awesome and we'll slide right into number two. Youth.

**Lisa Njenga:** Cynthia Nyongesa. She has this amazing um blog, um stroke vlog um online where she basically interviews um young leaders within the community that are basically trying to support their community in different aspects.

And so, *Cynthia Untamed* is the name of her blog and I think that is what um I would recommend because you know it's, it's not only a blog to just like share some information but it is a blog to inspire as well um to inspire young people to you know to reach for the stars and to do as much as they can.

Um because I think sometimes young people think maybe they're not able to-to do something because they need resources or something, but this is something that has been done online um and she has a great reach and I think that that's worth mentioning.

**Natasha Zena:** Absolutely just a fantastic young lady and she has really good content over there at *Cynthia Untamed* uh so I highly recommend that as well uh. Third, last but not least my favorite one, disrupt.

**Lisa Njenga:** Thanks so much. So one of the winners for this year, for Youth Challenge 2.0 that was done solely online. These young women from Mexico actually came up with this amazing innovation uh they call it ‘Erandi Aprende.’

So, if you speak Spanish then I guess you might understand. So, basically uh the young girls from Mexico designed this personalized education platform.

Yeah, uh to provide resources tools and educational programs to awaken this interest in science and technology for young girls.

And the reason this stands out to me the most is because first and foremost we are literally marinating in a pandemic, right? So women and girls in science and technology has already been an issue, I mean people have been trying to tackle this for some time but now with the increasing barriers that uh the pandemic has brought on, this individual and her team was able to actually come up with something that can support young women within uh Mexico and because it's online can expand across the globe of course um with the right support.

**Natasha Zena:** So important. I love uh young girls and women getting involved in science and tech. I’m a big fan of it.

Lisa I thank you so-so much for joining us today. You gave us such rich, invaluable uh information and-and gems to think about.

Youth Power 2 Learning and Evaluation (YP2LE) has a host of additional resources around the safe spaces topic. Remember you can access them all and a host of others at [youthpower.org/pydlab](https://youthpower.org/pydlab).

The first one is the Youth Center Toolkit. This toolkit provides resources and examples of constructive spaces that include after school programs and youth centers.

The second resource that you want to check out is our Safe Spaces for Girls Starter Kit.

While it does help you create safe spaces for young women and girls in your community, it promotes the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal number five, which is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Now this is one of my favorite starter kits because it has 16 additional resources that are aimed at NGOs, businesses, and individuals who want to create and improve safe spaces for women and girls to thrive. Last but not least is our Youth Engagement Starter Kit, which makes tons of sense in this conversation because it's all about engaging youth.

It's full of videos and additional toolkits on the importance of youth engagement and the impact it can have in your community.

(Music starts)

A special thank you to Cynthia and Lisa for joining us for this episode.

Until next time, this is Natasha and you've been in the PYD Lab.