

# Our Spaces, Power Spaces: YWCA's Safe Spaces Guide

A product of



WorldYWCA



# About the World YWCA

We are a global women's rights organisation engaging millions of women, young women, and girls around the world each year, across cultures and beliefs, to transform lives and the world for the better. With a presence in over a hundred countries, our work is grassroots-driven, grounded in local communities and rooted in the transformational power of women. We provide support and opportunities for women, young women, and girls to become leaders and change-makers who not only protect their rights and impact their communities, but inspire their peers to do the same.

We are focussed on building a strong, intergenerational network of women and young women leaders, with programmes led by and for women and young women in response to the unique needs they see in their communities.

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## Reach out: We are here to help!

As you practise the YWCA Safe Spaces, reach out with any challenges or questions. This Guide is a living document and is designed to be inclusive of all abilities, identities, and ages.

Language is important to the practise of safe spaces, and having content in your local language is critical to encouraging the practise. We are happy to support you through the translation process. We also recognise that some of the content in this Guide may be sensitive in your country, so please practice with care when you do so.


When translating this Guide, the copyright (in the above section) stays intact, and you should include a note that the original text was written in English and the name of your translator. We suggest stating, "The original text was written in English. This in-language version was translated by [insert name of translator]". Learn more about translations in the [How To Use This Guide](#) section.

Please contact us at World YWCA ([getinvolved@worldywca.org](mailto:getinvolved@worldywca.org)) if you wish to become a partner, provide feedback, or if this Guide does not meet your accessibility needs. We are happy to support your journey of cultivating safer spaces in our communities where we live, work, and play.

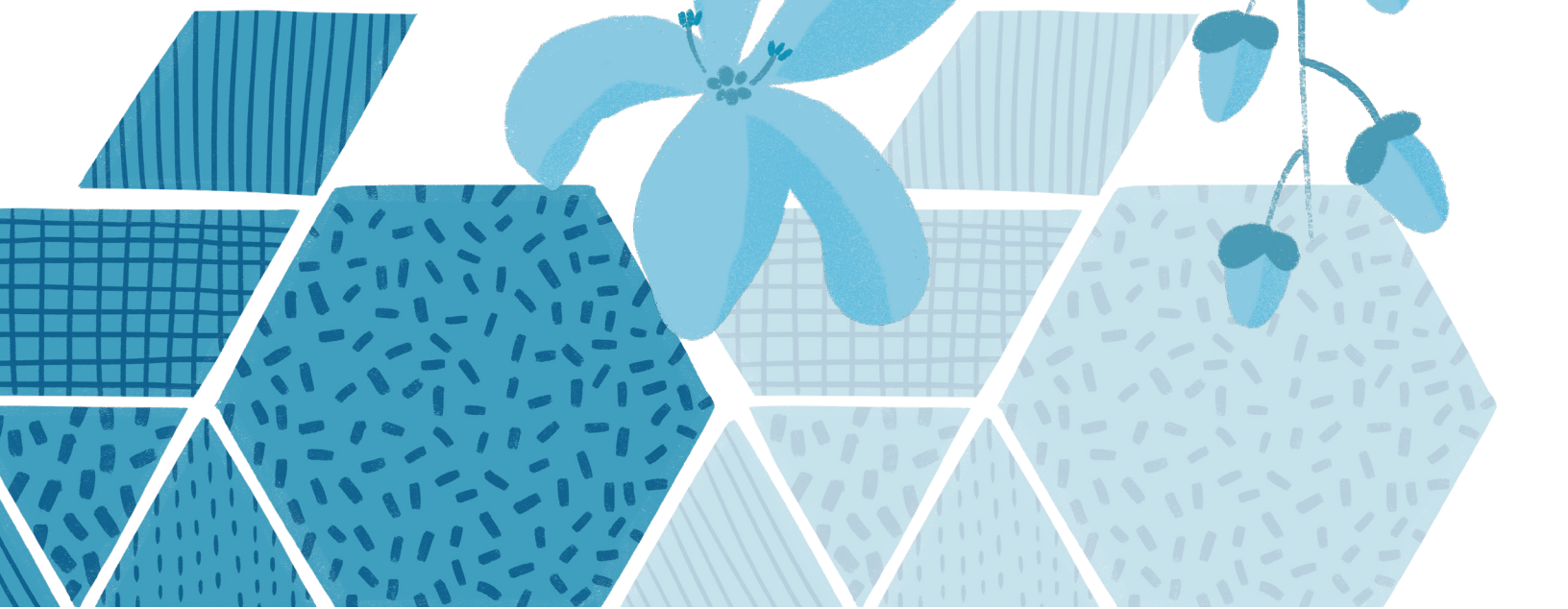

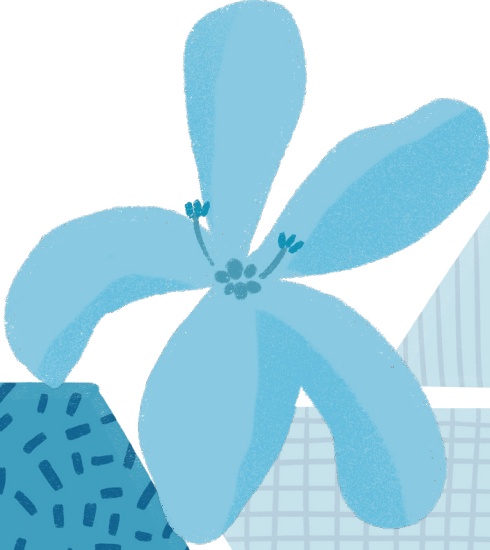


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We are mosaics, bound by words  
We all shine, with different hues,  
Some are soothing green or carry red of pain,  
Creating peace despite the blues.





# A Word From World YWCA

YWCA's Safe Space is informed by remarkable history and experience, as well as shifting technologies and social-economic-political contexts. YWCA's Safe Space serves as an important concept that is scalable, customizable, and applied to the specific needs of people in their local communities, dealing with different, relevant issues and connecting them with resources, information, and opportunities. With shifting technologies, these safe spaces have begun in the virtual world—connecting women of all ages beyond geographic barriers, and weaving together a shared community.

In the workplace, at the market, in a chatroom, on an app, or at home...women, young women, and girls navigate a wide range of spaces during their lives. And yet, oftentimes these spaces are not welcoming environments for them. Many spaces—whether formal or informal, public or private, virtual or in-person—send reminders to women, young women, and girls that they cannot be their authentic selves. Simply put, many spaces are not designed for women, young women, and girls, and do not prioritise their well-being.


Without question, humanity has made many strides when it comes to gender equity. And yet, patriarchal structures and systemic injustices continue to impact women, young women, and girls. Around the world, cultural dynamics inform how people are treated. In some cases, women face violence and undignified treatment on a daily basis. In other cases, women may appear to be free and autonomous yet still experience harm. Unfortunately, acts of injustice—harassment, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV),

discrimination, and abuse to name a few—are common in the lives of women, young women, and girls as they move through different spaces. The scars from these acts may not be visible, and yet they signal a violation of psychological and emotional safety.

This is why it is important to create intentional opportunities for gathering—especially for women, young women, and girls.

To be clear, safe spaces for gathering are not meant to deny the realities of individuals, communities, or the world. Instead, safe spaces can offer respite. They can create calm environments away from constant critique. They can provide opportunities for vulnerable sharing. They can foster the conditions to show up as the authentic version of ourselves, spaces where we continue to practise our leadership skills. They can be places for forming and deepening community bonds. And for women, young women, and girls, having access to spaces where we feel we belong is critical to our health and well-being.

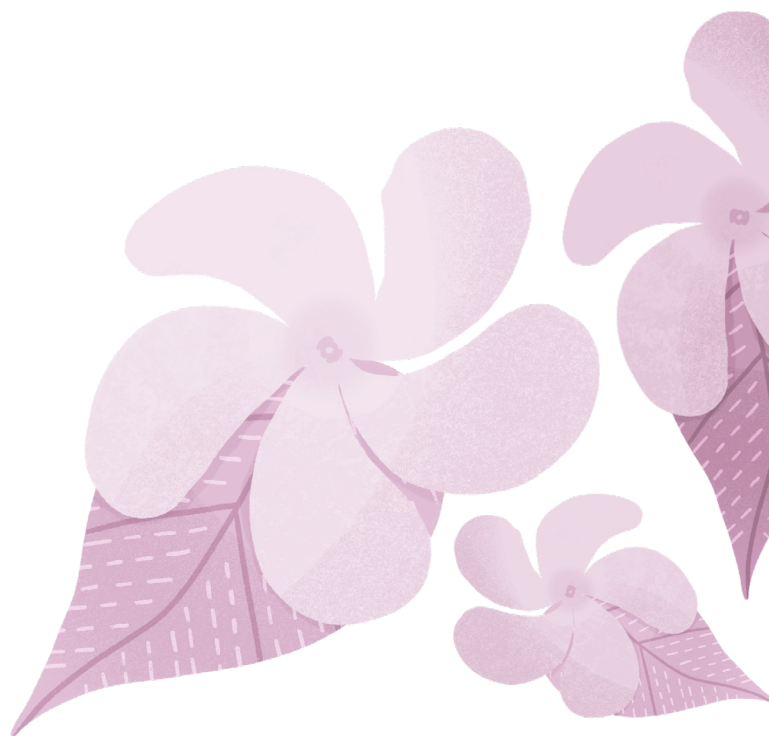
This Guide, *Our Spaces, Power Spaces* tells the story of how and why practising safe spaces can be transformative. And at the heart of any transformative action is a profound sense of engagement, buy-in, and ownership. With this in mind, this Guide is a customisable template to make your own! Adding in your unique context to this Guide helps your safe space to be culturally relevant. Building on the Defining Standards in this Guide allows you to create a welcoming environment.



This document represents a timely refresh to the YWCA Safe Spaces Guide. But why update a resource that for years has supported women, young women, and girls in gathering? In short, our world is changing and we need to change with it. As societal challenges become more complex, the global feminist movement must respond in ways that expand upon the foundations of our ancestors. Collectively, we can move the needle on the world's most pressing issues by anchoring our efforts in feminist traits such as empathy, compassion, and equity. By reflecting the world's current realities in this updated Guide, we can continue fostering connections on a human-to-human level, and cultivating the next generation of leaders. As a practise, YWCA Safe Spaces is never about saviourship. Instead, it is about collective transformation with shared input, accountability, and reward.

Each of us has the power to create change—but first we need to unlock our agency. This is why spaces for gathering are so critical. These spaces can serve many purposes. They might be places to access information, build a social network, develop confidence, practise leadership skills, receive support, express ideas, entertain one another, learn new topics, or celebrate successes. As intergenerational spaces, they might also be places to practise reciprocity among women and girls. Regardless of what brings women and girls together, the act of gathering is powerful. When in dedicated spaces surrounded by ongoing support and safety, something magical happens. Women and girls begin to bloom as individuals, and expand their collective capacity as agents of change.

It is important to acknowledge the reality that no space is ever 100% safe. Best intentions and thoughtful planning can still result in instances of harm, stigma, judgement, stress, violations, or emotional triggers. Naming and addressing this unfortunate reality is key. The work toward gender equity is a collective effort. In recent years, women, young women, and girls have been deeply impacted by world events. As women, young women, and girls across the world continue to respond to climate change, conflict, economic instability and COVID-19, investing in safe spaces is now more critical than ever. As a convener for the feminist movement, we must stand in solidarity with others to shape the future. This is the way forward to build collective power, influence change, and celebrate the transformative power of women, young women, and girls.







Our team is always learning, and would love to hear about how you practise Safe Spaces. **Reach out if you have questions ([getinvolved@worldywca.org](mailto:getinvolved@worldywca.org))**. There is an engaged network of diverse, intergenerational, and multidisciplinary leaders who are ready to support your journey. It is our honour to support you on our shared path of leading a sustainable movement—inclusive of everyone in all our diversities. Share your learnings with us.

## Artist Statement

The World YWCA has a long-standing history of helping women build spaces. Since its first iteration over 150 years ago, it has evolved into a practise that women, young women, and girls of all ages can use to create real, impactful change in their communities.

## Creative Concept

As we developed the visual concept for *Our Spaces, Power Spaces*, we wanted to pay homage to the colourful and storied tile patterns: *la talavera* in Mexico and the Moroccan tradition of *zellige*, to name a few. When creating a pattern with tiles, an artist might start by sketching a design. She might then work to find tile pieces that fit the design. The pieces might be small or large, bright or dull, jagged or smooth. All of the tiles are then gathered and pieced together. Each piece is unique. Some might be intact, others chipped. But when glued together, they change to form something strong and beautiful. This is the same concept we embrace with the YWCA Safe Spaces gatherings. Women, young women, and girls in all of their diversities gather together. Each one needed, in their full authenticity, to create the transformative change that happens in these gatherings. Some beaming with hope and ideas. Others in need for people to bear witness to their truths. Any looking for a community to discuss culturally taboo or sensitive topics. And perhaps, those who want to collaborate in advancing



gender equity. These gatherings help to unlock the potential of women, young women and girls joining together, and recognize the interdependence and uncertainty of the path forward to impact their lives, families, and communities. As you navigate this Guide, we hope the fluidity of the images inspire you to engage fresh, new ideas to build a curated YWCA Safe Spaces, unique to the needs of your community.

Just as tiles build upon each other to create beautiful patterns, safe spaces fuel the feminist movement. As you use this Guide, you'll find opportunities to make impactful change in your community: one gathering at a time. Participants offer their individual experience, knowledge, and perspectives with the group. Imagine yourself laying your own tile, where trust, connection, and empathy are the grout that binds us together. Consider each gathering, touchpoint, or exchange of dialogue as an opportunity to add your own tile to the movement, to co-create in sisterhood.

## How to Use This Guide

YWCA Safe Spaces Guide is for global communities of women, young women, and girls with a desire to collectively discuss issues, share experiences, strategise, celebrate, and so much more. It is meant for people gathering based on shared identities and people who want to gather across racial, gender, religious, national, ethnic, sexuality, and age differences.



We call our gatherings, *Our Spaces*, *Power Spaces*, but we encourage you to get creative with where you host gatherings to what you name them! Provided that the Defining Standards are followed, your gathering is a safe space. Some people avoid calling their gatherings a safe space. Choosing a name for the gathering supports the foundation of group identity and introduces a sense of belonging, increases accountability, and enhances motivation among participants. While selecting a name may not create these benefits immediately, it's a good starting point!

### Translations

For people who may be translating this Guide, be mindful that the meaning of certain words and phrases may change when translated. For example, if your community is prohibited from having certain discussions, (i.e., around sex, sexuality or gender, etc.), we recommend blackening out that specific content or leaving the page empty but denoting that it reflects content that was removed because of local censoring laws. In retaining the page in the document where the original content was is an act of activism in and of itself.

*Our Spaces*, *Power Spaces* will be translated into several languages for women, young women and girls to impact their communities around the world. However, certain words and phrases may not translate well. It is important to work with a translator equipped in copy-editing and proofreading through a feminist lens, and understands concepts of patriarchy, collective power and shared leadership. When we create safe spaces, we participate in dialogue with others in a way that is respectful and invites everyone to the conversation.



Throughout this Guide, when we say ‘women’, we are referring to an overarching category of people, in all their diversity, as a non-biological category. This means we include all people who identify themselves as women or non-binary, of all ages, who identify as we believe in the power of inter and intragenerational voices in these shared spaces.

## Why Us, Why Now?

There is an increasing need for us as women, young women, and girls to have dedicated spaces. Within trusting environments, we can engage freely, share our stories, and explore new ideas. While it is important to engage men and boys, gender-specific spaces can provide environments for critical conversations that might not happen otherwise. We acknowledge the importance of including diverse perspectives (agnostic of gender) for inclusivity, innovation, and change. However, women, young women, and girls—many of us already dealing with multiple intersecting forms of oppression—have unique needs when it comes to sharing our voice. Unfortunately, we are often less likely to express our opinions, ask questions, and take up space when the systems in which we live within promote beliefs that our voices do not matter.

Excluding the voices of women, young women, and girls is a loss for everyone. We need respite from spaces where our contributions are not centred—and we must embrace opportunities to share our experiences, ideas, and questions! YWCA **Safe Spaces** offers vital resources and information to women, young women, and girls by encouraging us to critically explore together with others what we want for ourselves and our communities. These spaces provide support for discussing sensitive topics, challenging societal norms, and exploring bold actions.

Throughout history and around the world, women-only spaces have existed and continue to offer dedicated environments. The intention of YWCA Safe Spaces ultimately depends on the participants. We want participants to make these **gatherings** and the rituals therein uniquely their own. Some spaces might support wellness, while others focus on political action. Some spaces might tackle a new topic at each gathering, while others build upon previous discussions. Regardless of the space, our intention is for YWCA Safe Spaces participants to experience gatherings that empower us to be our authentic selves and ignite the **agency** within us all. The impact of these gatherings have been profound. Dedicated spaces for women, young women, and girls hold a kind of magic that encourages us to take action and transform our lives and the lives of those around us.

### Safe Space

Online or offline places that seek to provide an environment where all people feel safe, comfortable, and can share their experiences, opinions, and views without fear or threat of political, economic or personal harm.

### Gathering

A meeting or coming together of people for a specific purpose and can vary in duration and format.

### Agency

Describes the ability of an individual or group of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices. Agency can be limited or influenced by discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, race, disability, social class, etc.

## **Feminist**

Describes an approach that places the transformation of power relations, and especially gender power relations, at the heart of all social change analyses or processes. Feminist change interventions centre on the empowerment of women and other marginalised genders; the transformation of gender power relations; and the advancement of gender equality. Feminist change interventions are often viewed through a 'gender lens', i.e. asking whether gender equality and women's rights are being consciously addressed and advanced by the change process.

## **Transformative Change**

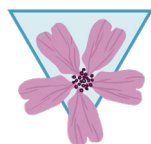
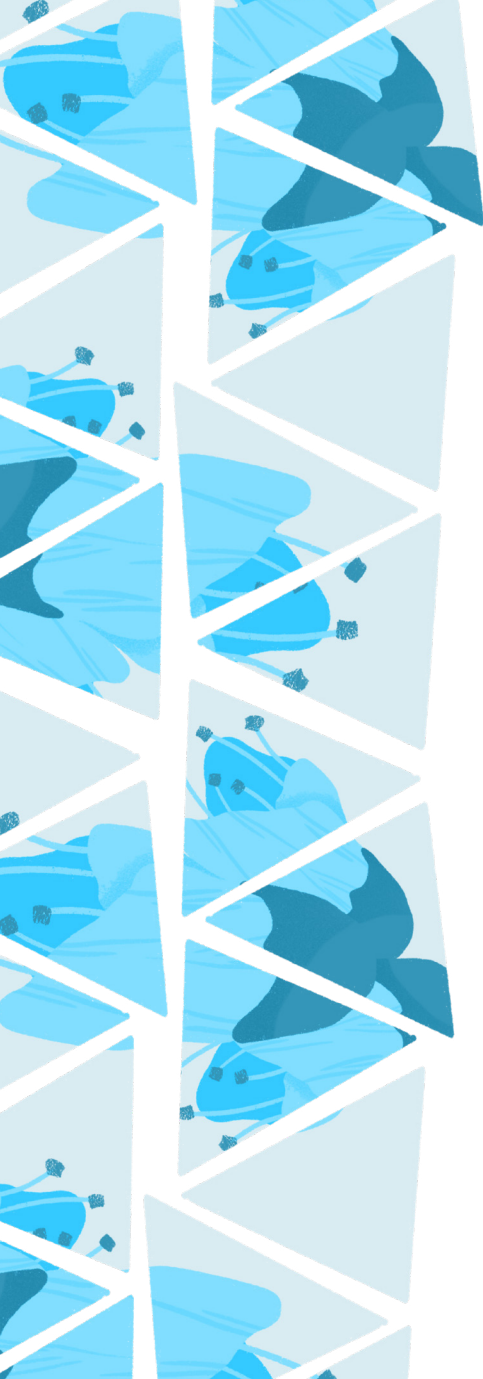
Goes beyond incremental change to changes that alter the context in which it is taking place. The change includes the learning process and experiences that contribute to a shift to do things, or think differently. It alters what is done, not how things are done—and helps us understand the world we live in.

A core goal of YWCA Safe Spaces is for participants to feel psychologically safe when sharing ideas, experiences, questions, and dreams. This means participants are not punished, humiliated, or ignored for sharing—and instead are met with curiosity, reciprocity, care, and celebration. For some women, young women and girls, it is natural to hold back from sharing your own ideas or offering a different point of view in response to someone else's idea. This is especially true when we do not feel comfortable in our environment. When we lack a sense of psychological safety, it triggers a stress response that limits cognitive functions. This means we operate from the trauma zone of our brain instead of the executive functioning part that allows us to make better decisions.<sup>1</sup> Within YWCA Safe Spaces, candour and vulnerability are normalised. Our hope is that as participants go through this Guide and participate in Safe Spaces, they build confidence in understanding that their ideas and voices are not only important, but necessary to share to have the desired individual and collective transformative change.

The purpose of this Guide is to share tested resources and guidance for cultivating and sustaining YWCA Safe Spaces. It is intended to be practical and easy to use for communities of women, young women, and girls around the world. It offers a step-by-step "How To" Guide to develop gatherings using the YWCA Safe Spaces practise. The Defining Standards are anchored in **feminist** principles, and encourage leadership development and collaboration from participants. Depending on the context, the practise of safe spaces can be a tool for change, impact, and self-expression. The resources in this Guide are designed to help facilitators and participants develop customised YWCA Safe Space programmes with monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) in support of women, young women, and girls—with the ultimate goal to achieve better individual and community outcomes.

Our goal with this Guide is to lead readers through our recommendations for structuring an effective Safe Spaces gathering. We believe that by incorporating the Defining Standards in these spaces, participants can engage in activities and conversations that lead to individual and collective transformative change. Transformative change means altering the way we view, understand, respond to, and accomplish things. It is not just doing a little more or less of something we are already doing, but a significant shift. Meaningful **transformative change** often starts small, but is strategic. YWCA Safe Spaces not only have transformative engagements with participants, but participants are empowered to share their learnings and understandings with others in their families and communities. This leads to facilitating changes to social norms.





## Building Safe Spaces In Action: Isabelle

Isabelle grew up in a part of Cameroon where people did not discriminate between boys and girls. By 16, her family relocated to northern Cameroon. Girls and boys were not allowed to engage with one another, girls were forced to skip school during menstruation and were married by 13. In objection to this inequity, Isabelle began to hold safe spaces for young women and their guardians. She discussed gender-based violence, child marriages, and stereotypes around menstruation with them, and addressed their views and perspectives in a culturally sensitive manner.

She became a recognised women's rights activist in the region. Young mothers would reach out to understand more about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and say, *"I wish our daughter grows up to be like you."* A year later, a few people encouraged her to join the YWCA movement, and she did.

As a Young Woman Leader, Isabelle facilitates conversations and trainings in safe spaces for young women and girls. She mobilises 10-14 year olds to understand reproductive health and organs, the first period, and menstruation superstitions. With the 15-25 year olds, she comes up with

solutions to address their challenges around family planning, mental health, livelihood opportunities, and leadership skills.

In Cameroon, some girls are forced to drop out of school and marry young, resulting in early pregnancy. Lack of education and, thus, an individual source of income makes them dependent on their husbands. All of these have a significant impact on their physical and mental health.

*"It's not easy to change the mentality, especially of parents,"* Isabelle laments, emphasising the need for intergenerational conversations.

She can see the influence of her work in creating a powerful community of young women who are enrolling in schools to build their skills, starting small local businesses, or taking up new job opportunities. Today, local teachers want their students to listen to Isabelle. Thirteen year olds aspire to become a leader like her.

Young mothers acknowledge her tireless efforts toward women **empowerment**, and the local mayor believes, *"She is a young woman who's blooming. And once she's bloomed, she'll be known all over the world."*

### Empowerment

The process of devolving or restoring power to an individual or a group of individuals.

Empowerment often helps individuals to grow stronger, more confident, and exert more agency and control over their life, rights and choices.

# History: Our Past, Present, and Collective Future

## Faith-based

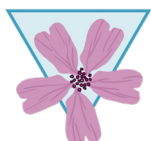
Describes something (an organisation, movement or approach) whose values or mission are based on a certain faith or system of beliefs.

In 1855, the YWCA (one of the oldest and largest feminist, **faith-based** organizations) first provided safe housing to young women arriving to London in search of employment. This marked the earliest idea of YWCA Safe Spaces. Today, YWCAs in local communities in over 100 countries around the world continue to provide safe spaces, serving over 25 million women, young women, and girls of all ages. While the idea behind YWCA Safe Spaces first came to life as an actual, physical space, the practise has evolved into any space where women, young women, and girls come together. Over the years, YWCA Safe Spaces have meant many things and have served various purposes—emergency shelters for survivors, support groups for women living with HIV, gatherings for open ecumenical conversations and inspiration, and celebrations of births, to name a few. These spaces are deeply rooted in social justice movements. YWCA Safe Spaces provide participants with a supportive and controlled environment to share their truths, bear witness to stories, learn, practise new skills, take initiative, and create real change.

It should be noted that while the YWCA is a faith-based organisation, the practise of safe spaces is agnostic of religion. Faith-based traditions, of all kinds, have sustained the richness of many community beliefs and values around the world. These traditions support the creation of opportunities for growth, leadership, and power in order to attain a common vision: peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all people. When thinking about safe spaces, for some, having a faith-based sanctuary for prayer and spiritual practises can be comforting. For others, spiritual spaces can be triggers for complex emotions or past harm. It is important to practise safe spaces in ways that acknowledge and support the unique needs of yourself and your participants.







## Building Safe Spaces In Action: A Faith-Based Gathering

During a gathering of 100 young people with ecumenical insights, nine young women from the YWCA movement led a workshop based on safe space principles aimed to contextualise the concept of inclusiveness and explore safe spaces and their potential as a powerful tool for transformative leadership and justice within the faith space. The safe space designed workshop brought in 10-20 participants from different parts of the world, all gathered physically in a room to engage and immerse in the concept of safe spaces together. All participants were encouraged to share their views and experiences on how to build, facilitate, and practise safe spaces while further strengthening trust, learning, sharing, accountability, and mobilising as a community. The safe space explored what “safe” means and invited collective reflection on how to

enable a space where everyone felt included and where dignity and respect would prevail at all times. One of the main takeaways was rethinking the concept of safe spaces. We can each become a safe space for ourselves and for others. Showing up in this way can be a tool that supports much-needed collective conversations regarding young people and their human rights. It showcased how safe spaces can be practised as a tool to facilitate conversations within recently met team members to engage in discussions on critical issues such as the role of faith and ecumenical organisations and individuals in facilitating safer conversations.



# YWCA Safe Spaces

Ideas about ‘safety’ have grown and changed over time and across cultures. Somewhere along the way, a prevailing definition of safety took root. Society began to normalise the idea of safety needing to look and feel the same way for everyone—agnostic of intersecting identities. Similarly, society started accepting the idea that safety can be assumed—or in other words, a misguided belief that safety will automatically exist if certain conditions are met. Not surprisingly, these ideas about safety limit people’s ability to meaningfully convene. In reality, social and cultural contexts largely shape how a person experiences safety. Safety cannot exist without a deep understanding of the needs of people in all their diversities—not to mention an acknowledgement of the complex ways culture interacts with systems of oppression. And without safety, people are constrained in their efforts to collectively share their experiences, explore new ways of being, and combat issues that matter to them.

A YWCA Safe Space aims to create an accessible and inclusive environment where participants feel safe, valued, supported, and empowered. It is a gathering where people of all backgrounds—especially women, young women, and girls, who often face greater barriers to opportunities and resources—can come together to connect, learn, and engage. It is a space where participants can freely share opinions, experiences, and information without fear or threat of harm or abuse. It is a space rooted in the transformational and collective power of feminism—where we as women, young women and girls are at the centre of our empowerment and can create lasting change in the lives of others and in our communities.

YWCA Safe Spaces is a practise that is customizable, scalable, and adaptable to meet the needs and purpose of a particular space or community. It is guided by a set of **Defining Standards** rooted in feminist principles. A safe space can be wherever participants gather based on cultural norms and behaviours. These gatherings can come to life at a community centre, the basement of a faith-based gathering place, by the river where laundry is done, in a chat room, or on a mobile application. Regardless of the location, safe spaces provide supportive places to practise new skills, discuss important topics that are not always publicly addressed (e.g., sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), abuse, family planning, mental health, etc.), tackle challenges, take initiative, build community, as well as become leaders and changemakers.



## Power

The capacity or ability to influence—through individual action or by contributing to collective efforts—the behaviour of others or the course of events.

### Why Safe Spaces are Important and Necessary

Safe spaces can be refuges where trusting conversations are the currency for social, emotional, and mental well-being. Regardless of what form they take, safe spaces are where women, young women, and girls come together, build support systems, and have their experiences validated—all crucial elements to fostering belonging, strengthening resilience, and developing leadership. YWCA Safe Spaces allow participants to be their authentic selves. Safe spaces provide opportunities for participants to share hopes for the future, acknowledge the pain of others, and celebrate individual and collective successes. These gatherings can range from community meetings for political conversations to dance parties for self-expression.

## Safe Spaces Are Brave Spaces

‘Bravery’ is a shared value in spaces among feminist humanitarian organisations that role-model and discuss positive **power**. At its core, brave spaces are physical and dialogical spaces where communications is actively engaged in the face of risk, where disagreement has value, and where we commit to sitting with discomfort.<sup>2</sup> Demonstrating bravery within a safe space is essential to support women, young women, and girls as they individually and collectively question, discover, and transform power. Fostering leadership and participation among participants is a key part of the YWCA Safe Spaces practise.

Brave spaces and safe spaces may appear to be from the opposite sides of the spectrum—one from discomfort and another from safety—yet this is not true. Both champion an environment of psychological safety and both recognise the value of others’ opinions. However, while psychological safety and physical safety are closely related, safe spaces aren’t always about literal physical safety from violence; sometimes they are a place of refuge, rest, or celebration.

## Technology and Safe Spaces

More and more participants are using safe spaces and learning how to implement them in their homes, workplace, communities, and personal relationships. With technological advancements, changing communication landscapes, shifting sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts, it’s no surprise that safe spaces are changing too. These shifts continue to evolve how safe spaces are created and who is reached through new levels of participation. For example, the shifts brought on during the COVID-19 pandemic saw an increase in adapting safe spaces for the virtual realm. Women continued to support each other by building and engaging with communities via safe spaces using technological tools. A shift from the physical to the virtual world means safe spaces can exist anywhere and connect us beyond geographical barriers. It is up to each group to decide whether an in-person, online, or mobile gathering works best. Some groups might stick to one form, while others may choose a hybrid approach for their gatherings. Regardless of how the safe space takes shape, it is important for spaces to be accessible and inclusive. The common threads across all safe spaces are feelings of safety, support, and empowerment that weave people together into a community of oneness.



### Word of Caution

Even with the best intentions, it is important to note that not all inequalities and forms of oppression can be addressed in every space. As such, no space can ever be 100% safe. Because no safe space can anticipate and plan for every trigger, it is essential to prepare by identifying ways to address challenges and offer concrete support to reduce potential harm. See [Safeguarding Mechanisms](#) and [Restorative Care](#) more information on how to safeguard the space as well as promote healing and learning in the event that harm occurs.



## Intersecting Identities and Safe Spaces

Gender-based inequality impacts women, young women, and girls in communities throughout the world. However, not all inequality is experienced in the same way. Experiences of inequality are compounded by our intersecting identities which can include race, gender, sexuality, religion, class, ethnicity, nationality, and disability. Acknowledging and understanding how our identities intersect is critical to breaking down the barriers preventing us from feeling safe. Doing so honours and recognises our humanity. It shines light on the truth that, to some, the idea of safe and brave spaces denies the daily realities that racialised, queer, and other marginalised people face in interactions that are inherently hostile to their core identities. To some, the terms 'safe and brave spaces' may trigger feelings that deny their lived experiences. It is crucial to remember this when designing and bringing to life a safe space, and to do what's needed to help people to feel supported and valued. This Guide will help you to anticipate and address individual and collective triggers.

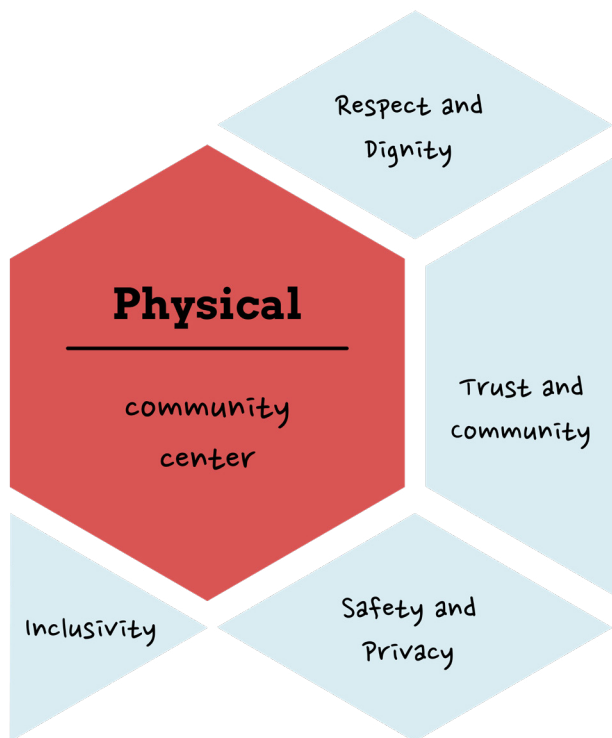
## Cultural Norms and Safe Spaces

To cultivate a safe space, we need to also consider how some of our behaviours may be based on colonised practises. It is important that YWCA Safe Spaces are culturally safe places for highlighting community, relationships, and cultural connections. By using a culturally appropriate approach, we acknowledge, validate, and honour social and community norms. Understanding cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes helps participants to exercise respect, empathy, and consideration for the well-being of others in the gathering. We need to intentionally interrogate how we uphold behaviours and rituals that do not promote inclusion. For example, there may be things shared during a gathering that we do not understand. In these moments, we each need to be accountable for how we may be triggered and our reactions that follow. Sometimes, we might feel compelled to lash out or try to exert control over the situation. Instead, it is important to remember that we do not always need to know or have answers. By taking a moment to pause and understand why we are triggered, we can begin to unlearn how systems of oppression influence our behaviour.



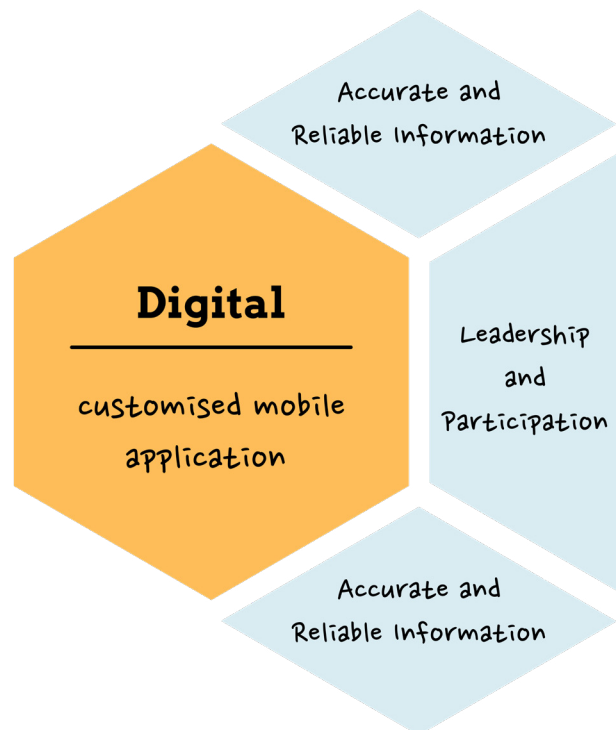
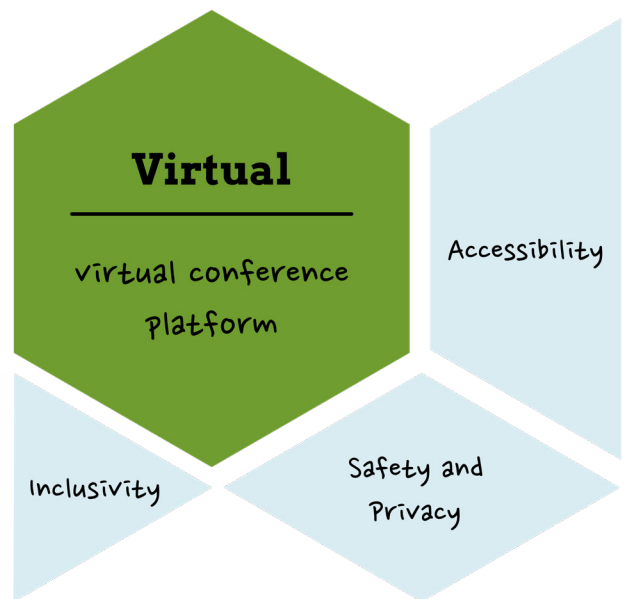
## Examples of YWCA Safe Spaces:

- A physical room at a community center where women can go to discreetly discuss and share resources about sexual and reproductive health and rights.



- A moderated, digital platform allowing women to strategise political actions without fully revealing their identity.

- A virtual safe space where women meet monthly online to talk about challenges related to mental health and where to seek support.





## Notes



## Building Safe Spaces In Action: Daniela

By April of 2020, while Daniela appreciated the necessity to socially distance from others, she noticed the ways in which the pandemic further increased the hardships that women faced. She became frustrated by the inability of governments around the world to address COVID-19 through a gender lens. In response, she embraced virtual spaces to generate feminist solidarity. “I truly think it’s important to build an online support system and that the gender equality conversation must not be muted during this time. On the contrary, it must be amplified and it must be louder.” She was able to participate in a virtual safe space where she was seen and realised it provided connection that she and other women sought. By having space to discuss a range of issues with similarly situated women with relatable experiences, she found the comfort she

needed. She found that these spaces provided the opportunity to come together to figure out ways to actively support women in our communities, while continuing the fight for equality. “Listening to the solutions the participants proposed during the virtual safe space I attended, confirmed that there is a lot of power when brainstorming and working with each other online, wherever possible and in a safe manner.” Daniela knew that women around the world could not wait for government response to issues impacting them. And so she continuously encouraged women to create or participate in a virtual safe space, believing that these spaces can provide support that ranges from comfort to re-energising one’s activism.



# Preparing Our Foundation

A key outcome of YWCA Safe Spaces is to inspire individual and collective transformational change. Over time, the magic that grows within a safe space can have a significant impact on both the participants and the community at large. That said, we know transformation is a process that requires time and thoughtful input. When gathering with the goal of laying the groundwork for transformative change, it is important to first clarify the purpose and objective of the gathering. To uncover these intentions, we might ask ourselves questions like: *‘What do we want to accomplish during these gatherings? How do we want people to feel? What do we expect people to do after the gathering is over?’* Clarifying the reason for the gathering promotes respect for participants.

While individual and collective change is the end goal of a YWCA Safe Space, we must first create the conditions for meaningful connection and dialogue. Or in other words, we must create a safe space. But safe spaces don’t happen by accident—they require thoughtful planning and care for participants. For a space to be safe, the foundational tiles of the YWCA Safe Spaces practise need to be in place. This means the gathering (1) applies a feminist approach, (2) incorporates a monitoring, evaluation, and learning system, (3) adheres to a set of community agreements, and (4) practises consent.

## Taking a Feminist Approach

For the YWCA, it is essential for safe spaces to be brought to life using a feminist approach. As one of the foundational building blocks for safe spaces, this means centring women, young women, and girls. In doing so, spaces become trusted containers for participants to share their lived experiences, engage critically, dismantle broken systems, and deconstruct patriarchal ideas. To

actively uphold feminist ideologies in safe spaces, this Guide follows a feminist approach rooted in these core principles:

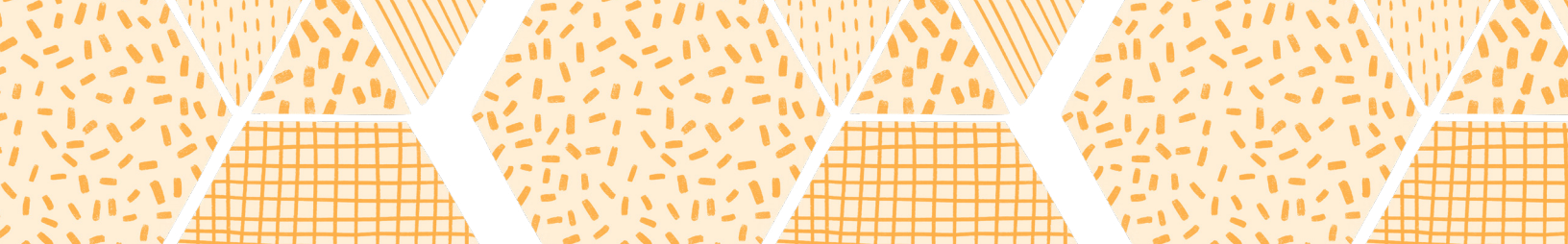
### The Power of Language

Words have the power both to build people up or tear them down. With this in mind, it is critical for participants of safe spaces to understand and commit to using language that is welcoming and respectful. Throughout the gathering, consider the role of language and terminology in making the space more inclusive and accessible to participants regardless of identity, background, or experience. Encourage participants to uphold the value of a safe space by using language that is non-hierarchical, non-discriminatory, and to use gender-neutral terminology.

Showing respect can take the form of using the language people ask to be used and referring to people according to how they wish to be addressed. For example, recognising people with the pronouns they use can be the first sign of respect for a person’s identity. Facilitators can begin conversations in a safe space by sharing their pronouns and inviting participants to share how they would like to be addressed. That said, it is important to note that this and other similar requests are always invitations. Many queer people face violence and risk to their physical and psychological harm by sharing their identities. Remember that language is both a descriptor and a generator of reality.

It is important that a safe space uses the local language(s) of its participants. Using local languages helps to bridge understanding and impacts the ability of participants to engage. Local languages can also express certain sentiments, concepts, and feelings that may not translate into mainstream languages, and can support deeper communication.





It is not uncommon in any safe spaces gathering for participants to speak a variety of languages. It is important to understand how to communicate effectively—especially when the primary language in which the gathering is conducted is not the first language of one or more participants. We can do this by being cautious of our pace of speech and tone. However, it is easy to come across as being condescending when speaking slowly. Be mindful of how your pace and tone is received. Also, remember to limit the complexity of your vocabulary and use plain language, avoid the use of complex words or phrases, slang terms and acronyms. Make it as easy as possible for all participants to understand and engage in conversation.

Learn more about how to [Design for Clear Language](#)<sup>3</sup> in the World YWCA's [Feminist Consultation Methodology](#).<sup>4</sup>

## **Balance of Power**

Power is a social construct, and power dynamics can surface in many spaces. Safe spaces can be designed where participants experience their own and others' power in an equitable manner. YWCA Safe Spaces work best with a participatory leadership model. This means all participants share power and play a role in the decision making process. To balance power and create transparency, groups are encouraged to build consensus instead of giving any one person or group of people sole decision making authority. This includes the facilitators! This can be done by ensuring participants have a say in where the gatherings are held, what topics are discussed, as well as by establishing community agreements. Sharing power can work to amplify voices to help share experiences, offer vital and accurate information, and spark individual and collective action.

## **Fostering Collaboration**

Safe spaces are only as strong as the collaborative effort offered by its participants. In fact, the impact of a safe space may depend on the willingness of participants to share ownership in accomplishing the goals of each gathering. Strong collaboration requires communication and a commitment to achieve shared outcomes. A safe space can foster collaboration by ensuring everyone has the opportunity to contribute, rotating facilitation roles and sharing ownership of the creation, sustainability, successes, failures, and impacts of the gatherings. Strong collaborative gatherings have far-reaching positive impacts on the larger goals of the YWCA Safe Space. Collaboration strengthens connections, communication, and learning that leads to meaningful transformative change.

## **Practising Accountability**

While our worldviews are shaped by our experiences and perspectives, we must strive to be reflective, present, and accountable. Everyone is on a journey toward betterment—and that journey inevitably involves making some mistakes along the way. When those mistakes harm other people, it is important to accept responsibility and take initiative to make amends. In a safe space, participants can hold themselves and each other accountable by speaking up, owning mistakes, accepting criticism, and adhering to commitments. Taking responsibility for the intention and impact of individual as well as collective actions help to develop trust and foster meaningful relationships. Practising accountability is not about shame, but about learning. There may be some discomfort in navigating the process, but remember this is an opportunity for growth.

## Practising Self and Collective Care

In a world that often exploits the emotional, mental, and physical labour of women, the act of self and collective care is essential to preservation. Taking care of oneself and the collective helps build personal resilience and ensures the sustainability of the safe space. This is an opportunity to experiment and reimagine what a safe space can be! Design a space that counters the depletion and exhaustion that many women and girls experience. This might involve sharing knowledge, validating one another's experiences, taking breaks, offering support, providing food, dancing, singing, laughing, and celebrating one another.

## Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

As a process, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) helps to make sense of a programme's activities and impact. In other words, MEL provides a framework to understand the effectiveness of a programme and whether or not it is meeting its desired outcomes. From the start, gatherings should include at the least a basic MEL framework when following the practise of YWCA Safe Spaces. This does not need to be too complicated. The process starts with understanding and clearly outlining the goals of the gatherings. For some gatherings, a goal might be to provide a culturally appropriate and accessible space to discuss reproductive health issues. For other gatherings, a goal might be to equip participants with a sense of self and collective empowerment to use their voices. Without measurement and evaluation, it is impossible to know whether a gathering or series of gatherings are having their intended transformative impact. It is often seen that having simply one gathering is not transformative. Investing time and energy in MEL helps determine the effectiveness of the gathering and ensures growth and positive social returns.

## Monitoring

Monitoring is about collecting information to track whether the gatherings are creating the intended impact. It is important to set measurable goals for the impact you want to make, and to track those goals while you work toward achieving them. Metrics that you might use in your monitoring assessment include: How many participants have joined multiple gatherings? What are the ages of the participants? How many report feeling a sense of belonging? How many participants report using techniques from the gatherings in their daily lives? How many participants report greater confidence in decision-making? How many participants share resources from the gatherings with other people in their lives? With permission, this information can be collected by observing and taking notes during the gatherings, as well as from focus groups, surveys, and one-on-one interviews.

## Evaluation

Evaluation explores the quality of the gatherings and how participants are growing and learning. The evaluation phase answers whether the YWCA Safe Spaces are achieving the desired goals, and explores the intended and unintended outcomes of the gatherings. This is an opportunity to reflect on the data collected in the monitoring phase. During evaluation, it is important to collaboratively make sense of the information, assess progress, and develop a shared understanding of how to move forward.

## Learning

The learning phase is about changing and improving based on new information. Once you have monitored and evaluated data about your gatherings, the last step is to iterate and incorporate learnings for making the YWCA Safe Spaces more impactful. It is important to make changes as you gain useful information, while remembering that some changes may require group

discussion, consensus, or additional resources. Being transparent about why changes are occurring and how they support learning objectives is crucial when practising YWCA Safe Spaces.

## In-Session Feedback

Feedback is a key driver in building confidence in the Safe Spaces process, and strengthening trust among participants. It is a process of continuous improvement, and allows participants to co-create and reimagine the experience. Many YWCA Safe Space facilitators ask for feedback at the end of each session. Reserving 5-10 minutes at the end of each session to ask, “*What went well?*” and “*What can we do better?*” is a quick and effective way to gather feedback. When it comes to collecting feedback, all opinions are equally welcome and valid. Discounting feedback can discourage people from speaking up. Examples of feedback might range from positive comments like, “*The gathering had great conversations and everyone was able to share,*” to more critical comments like, “*This room is noisy and there are too many outside distractions.*” Facilitators can use feedback to change how they conduct future sessions by keeping activities that worked well and making changes based on suggestions. As with the learning phase in the MEL process, some suggestions might be easy to include in the next gatherings, while others may need more discussion or time to incorporate.

We would love to hear about how you practise Safe Spaces and any insights that come up as you integrate monitoring, evaluation, and learning. You are each making an impact and transformative change in your communities. **Share your learnings with us:** [getinvolved@worldywca.org](mailto:getinvolved@worldywca.org)

Examples of MEL metrics might include:

- How many safe spaces were planned vs. conducted?
- How many participants attended safe spaces regularly? How many in total?
- How many hours of safe spaces are done? Virtual vs. in-person?
- What is our plan with hosting these safe spaces within our larger mission work? How will we track the change? Increase in the number of people attending? Consistency? Any deliverables?
- What has been the follow-up after the sessions?
- Are we reaching our target audience?

If safe spaces are part of a larger programme, connecting to the theory of change is instrumental in ensuring safe spaces are seen as a vehicle or platform for change. Some key indicators that can help map change can be:

- What are the most important things needed when creating a safe space for women, young women, and girls?
- How has the program created safe spaces for women, young women, and girls?
- What would you like to change about how the programme creates safe spaces for young women? By when? How will we track this over the course of the programme?
- How has having safe spaces helped participants grow? Increase in knowledge? Changes in: problem solving, thematic learning, life, skills, network of supporters, etc.



# Community Agreements

Community agreements (sometimes referred to as “community norms” or “guidelines”) create mutual understanding between participants about how to engage in an open and inclusive manner. They provide guidance for everyone to play a role in fostering participation, dialogue, respect, and trust-building within a space. These agreements guide the interactions in the space—setting boundaries and holding participants accountable for their behaviour, as well as being open to sharing and receiving feedback. These agreements provide a set of guidelines for how participants engage with each other as they work to take collective transformational actions.

Community agreements help to:

- Establish trust to ensure participants feel comfortable sharing honestly. It may take time to build and establish trust among participants, especially as it relates to sharing of sensitive topics. We suggest dedicating the first gatherings to connecting and building relationships before jumping into complex or delicate conversations.
- Find common ground in agreeing to work together effectively and respectfully.
- Ensure the longevity and sustainability of the safe spaces by creating a culture that upholds participants’ needs.
- Reinforce commitment to inviting observations about our behaviour where participants are open to being called in.
- Give participants full ownership of their experience by being accountable for individual actions.

Community agreements are typically either shared with or co-created by a group. Co-creating community agreements gives power to participants as they are more

likely to feel responsible for implementing and upholding the agreements (as opposed to rules imposed by the facilitator).

Conversations discussed in safe spaces can sometimes be emotional or painful to initiate and reveal. Remember that different people may hold different perspectives and have firmly held beliefs. Community agreements help by defining boundaries and providing guidelines for engaging with one another. The desired outcomes of conversations in the safe space can be easier to achieve when everyone is engaging in ways that honour boundaries and needs.

These agreements apply to everyone who joins any gathering, including guests. For instance, if a gathering is scheduled to discuss reproductive health issues and a physician is invited to provide information and answer questions, before entering the space, the physician must agree to the established community agreements.

Explore the [Community Agreements](#) to support your safe space.

## Notes

# Consent

Consent is a critical component to cultivating safe spaces. Instead of making assumptions on someone else's behalf, consent is all about asking. To practise consent within a safe space, it is essential to ask questions, request more information when needed, and seek permission before offering feedback or suggestions.

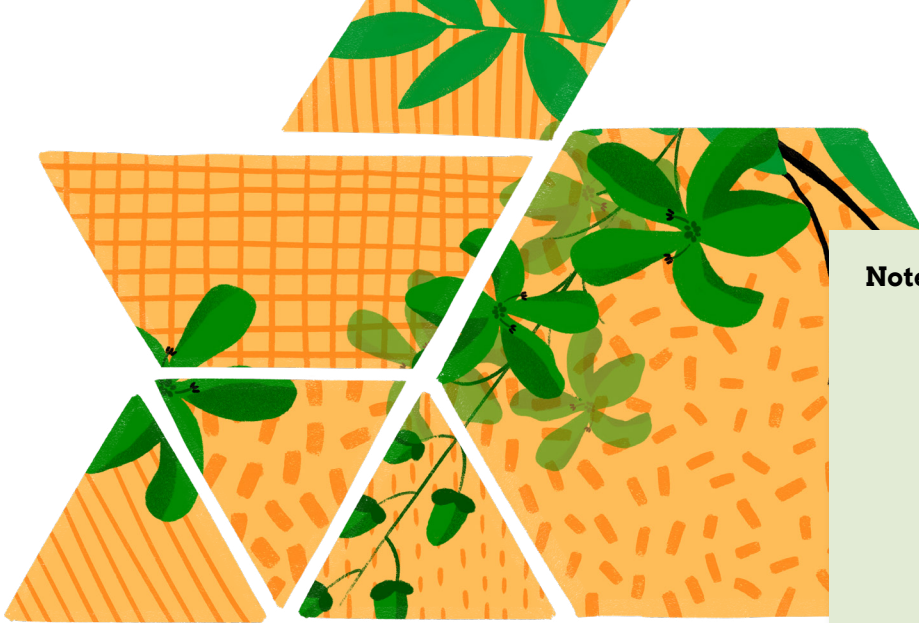
There are different types of consent:

- **Explicit consent** is expressed or direct consent where a person agrees or disagrees to an activity, such as engaging in a certain conversation or having their information collected, used, or disclosed. An example might be asking a participant, *“Do you want a listening ear or are you seeking advice?”* If the participant declines advice, others in the gatherings should refrain from offering any.
- **Implicit consent** is inferred or indirect consent based on voluntary action and circumstances. An example of this might be if a participant asks, *“What would you all do in this situation?”* Here, it is presumed that the participant would like advice in making a decision and the group can offer advice.
- **Opt-out consent** is when a person must take action to withdraw their consent. An example of this may be if a participant agrees to take a group photograph and later decides that they do not want it shared on social media. In this instance, it is important that all participants understand that the photograph is for personal use only and not to be shared publicly.

In safe spaces, it is imperative to obtain consent from participants. Seeking consent is a small yet powerful way of empowering participants by demonstrating their agency in shaping how they choose to participate.

Some safe spaces are open to anyone that wants to join and agrees to abide by the community agreements. Others are closed to a select group of people. If a group is closed and a new participant wants to join the gathering, explicit consent must be obtained from each participant prior to the new participant joining.





## Notes



## Building Safe Spaces In Action: YWCA Kenya

YWCA Kenya members knew that many young people were feeling sad, stressed, and angry during COVID-19. The isolation from family, friends, and community, along with lack of employment, led to increased risk and exposure to sexual and gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, and female genital mutilation, resulting from fear and anxiety. Their research found that in Kenya, 1 in every 4 Kenyans (11.5 million Kenyans) suffers from a mental illness at some point in their lives. Given the lack of trained mental health providers, the YWCA Kenya built a mobile app to provide members and vulnerable youth with personalised mental health

knowledge and information to link them to health services. The app supports users in identifying their mental health triggers, allows users to take an anonymous diagnostic test, reviews the score, and assesses mental health state. After the assessment, the app connects users to a licensed mental health professional or facility. Doing this addressed a gap by offering users a safe space to remain anonymous and receive much-needed resources.

More detail about the app is available on the [Google Play App Store](#).<sup>5</sup>





# Creating Our Community Mosaic

In this Guide, we share the skills, processes, and information you need for a YWCA Safe Spaces gathering. When participants enter into the space, they do so knowing their time is honoured, and their understanding of the gathering's purpose is shared by all. This clarity creates an invisible bond for participants to interact in supportive ways, and positions the gathering as a tangible tool for igniting transformative change. This Guide will lead you through a process from start to finish using a series of step-by-step instructions. Some steps may be simple, others more complex. The imagery reflected in this Guide symbolises one important concept: transformation. Tiles joined together represent many pieces becoming one to form a pattern. Just as some tiles are of varying sizes, shapes, and colours, YWCA Safe Spaces participants are diverse in age, race, class, religion, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. While this Guide is a tool to structure a Safe Spaces gathering, each gathering will vary. Each space will account for cultural norms, participants' needs, topics discussed, and overall goals of the gatherings.

While some of this Guide's content is quite weighty, take comfort in knowing not all gatherings need to be heavy. Around the world, YWCA Safe Spaces have been places of refuge, healing, learning, growth, and celebration. Our participants gather to share knowledge, concerns, experiences, as well as dances, laughter, and food. It is often in expansive and easeful spaces where people can begin exploring ideas beyond their wildest dreams. We encourage you to have fun when cultivating safe spaces! Look for opportunities to adopt the practises into your everyday life. Embrace the impact that comes when women, young women, and girls gather together. Remember that this Guide is here to support you—whether it be for systemic change, personal growth, and community engagement.



## Your Role as a YWCA Safe Spaces Facilitator

Whether you have previously facilitated a gathering or this is your first time, don't worry! You can be a great facilitator of a safe space by knowing the objective(s) of the space, as well as understanding the role of a facilitator and the impact you can make. A facilitator is a person who guides a group through discussion and collaborates with participants to meet goals and uphold principles that foster a safe space. Designated facilitators can have a significant impact on creating and maintaining a safe environment by championing the agreements, goals, and objectives of the space.

YWCA Safe Spaces facilitators strive to be compassionate and empathetic to all women, young women, and girls across their diversities. The facilitators consistently build safety and trust within a gathering by being approachable and accessible to all participants. In collaboration with participants, facilitators nurture feelings of fullness and community to support women in YWCA Safe Spaces to face adversity with tenacity and to serve others with love.



Being a YWCA Safe Spaces facilitator is an important role. Here are some tips to be an engaging and effective facilitator:

### **Practise Fairness**

Make sure everyone who desires to share has an opportunity to do so. As a facilitator, you help to guide the flow of conversations by supporting participants who may be hesitant to speak, as well as carefully limiting those who take up too much space.

### **Ask Instead of Tell**

Instead of lecturing, be sure to invite discussion, ask questions, and engage participants in conversation. Encourage participants to come up with their own answers and solutions. Hone the art of conversation design by asking open-ended questions instead of telling participants what to think or believe.

### **Be Inclusive**

The space should be inclusive of all who wish to join, irrespective of their faith, nationality, race, gender, sexuality, or ability. As a facilitator, it is your role to ensure everyone has equal opportunity to participate and share. Remember, everyone contributes in their own way, so be sure to create opportunities for all participants to share if they wish.

### **Actively Listen**

Engage in active listening by using cues to let the speaker know you are present and listening. Doing so helps the speaker to understand that you heard what they shared and honour their feelings and experiences.

### **Remain Flexible**

Much of what is discussed, revealed, and learned in YWCA Safe Spaces is unplanned. Each safe space is different and involves varying feelings and levels of participation. YWCA Safe Space facilitation is not a “one-size fits all” strategy. Be attentive and recognise what participants need so you can tailor or restructure to support them.

### **Be a Keen Observer**

Be on the lookout for small gestures, glances, and expressions among participants that help show what they are feeling in the gathering. Doing so helps you to find ways of addressing concerns such as conflict and/or triggers that may have surfaced in conversation.

### **Seek Feedback**

Check in with participants for feedback on how to improve the safe space and facilitation. For some, receiving constructive feedback can sting, but remember this is an opportunity to learn and grow in your leadership skills.

### **Get Creative**

Some of the topics discussed in safe spaces are heavy. Engage participants frequently in fun and energising activities to develop group identity, create a sense of belonging, and release tensions.



If you come across a powerful learning or story during the gathering, we invite you to share it with us to help evolve this Guide.

This Guide is a continual learning journey for all of us and was created by young women for young women.

Remember you don't have to know everything! If there is a situation you don't know how to handle, ask the group for help to brainstorm solutions. The role of the facilitator is to help guide the group through the gathering, not to act as the expert on any of the issues discussed. Think of your role as focussed on *how* participants engage, not on *what* is accomplished. In addition to being a facilitator, you too are also a full participant of the safe space. It is important to explore ways to objectively facilitate while sharing your own ideas and experiences.

Some groups may benefit from rotating facilitators or multiple facilitators for each gathering who share the role and its responsibilities. Rotating facilitators as a strategy is beneficial in supporting participants to develop new skills, share the accountability for maintaining the safe space, and reduce facilitator burnout. Even without rotating facilitators, the responsibility of maintaining the space belongs to *all* participants.

## Our Defining Standards for Safe Spaces

As a practise, YWCA Safe Spaces provides direction for addressing safe spaces with concrete steps to support conversation, community, connection, and collective action. At the heart of all YWCA Safe Spaces are ten Defining Standards. These standards are essential to cultivating safe spaces and must be present in order to uphold the values and best practises of what it means to be a YWCA Safe Space. It is encouraged that these standards be customised and adapted in response to participants' needs and contexts.

The Defining Standards come from YWCA's many years of experience working in local communities to affect change in support of women's rights, leadership, and gender equality. By committing to practising these standards, we can all be part of safe spaces where we can show up as our authentic selves and express our emotions, thoughts, and desires. These Defining Standards are the foundation of YWCA Safe Spaces gatherings. Each standard is represented by a different tile. While each one alone is important, all of them used together create a space for transformation. As with any tile pattern, it is the glue that binds each piece together. In a YWCA Safe Spaces gathering, the relationships built and connections made among participants are the glue that binds. We believe that these Defining Standard, when fused together, help to solidify the environment that creates the space for transformation.



## Gender Equity and Gender Equality

Gender equality and gender equality is a state where women, men, girls, and boys, and people of all genders can benefit from equal rights, treatment, responsibilities, and opportunities. Gender equality does not imply sameness. While gender equality aims to provide equal rights and opportunities to people of all genders, it does not address the systemic barriers that women and gender minorities may face due to other factors like age, ethnicity, race, ability, sexual orientation, etc.

Gender equity aims to provide fairness and justice so that marginalised groups can access these opportunities and benefit from these rights.

The YWCA Safe Spaces Defining Standards are:

### 1. Dignity and Respect

Safe spaces maintain a culture of mutual respect and dignity. These spaces foster trust among participants and serve as spaces where people can support, inspire, encourage, and validate each other without fear of judgement or discrimination.

### 2. Accessibility

Safe spaces take place in accessible, central, and convenient areas, locations, or platforms. These spaces uphold safety and privacy, and offer accommodations and/or necessary tools to ensure all participants have access. Accessible safe spaces prioritise outreach to remote areas and isolated communities using mobile outreach programmes and rural networks, and use virtual platforms that are accessible, user-friendly, confidential, and free from violence.

### 3. Inclusivity

Safe spaces support all participants to feel free to share openly and be respected, regardless of their identity. These spaces embrace and welcome participants in all their diversity.

### 4. Safety and Privacy

Safe spaces ensure the safety and privacy of participants. These spaces uphold confidentiality about the conversations taking place, and seek consent from participants if any information or content from the safe space is to be shared externally.

### 5. Trust and Community

Safe spaces create the conditions for participants to come together, openly share their experiences, and discuss their thoughts, challenges, and traumas. These spaces build solidarity and trust among participants by maintaining confidentiality and ensuring everyone feels validated and supported.

### 6. Holistic Approach

Safe spaces take into account the multiple aspects and contexts that affect participants' lives. These spaces provide information and services that are responsive and meet the actual needs of participants.

### Role of the Bystander

When seeing bullying or the misuse of a space, it is the collective accountability of everyone in the space to take action. We all play a role in calling out the behaviour, having a candid conversation about the situation, and exploring what reparative action may look like.



## **7. Partnership and Accountability**

Safe spaces serve as a place for people to practise community and leadership, and to be accountable for themselves and others—especially the wider community. These spaces exist to ignite positive change in support of gender equality and women's rights.

## **8. Accurate and Reliable Information**

Safe spaces share and promote factually accurate, evidence-based information that empowers participants to access required resources and make informed choices.

## **9. Leadership and Participation**

Safe spaces led by women, young women, and girls offer secure, inclusive, and empowering spaces for participants of all ages and in all their diversity. These spaces focus on leadership development and inclusive participation as essential ingredients to empower participants to be agents of change.

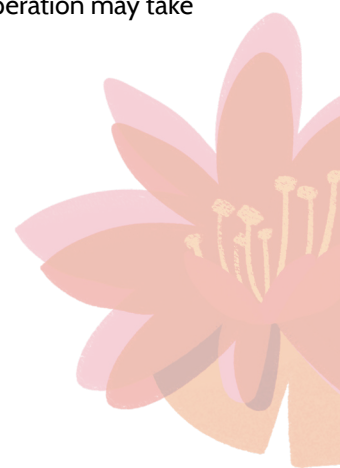
## **10. Intergenerational Cooperation**

Safe spaces encourage and create supportive relationship dynamics like intergenerational dialogue, sharing, mentorship, collaboration, and cooperation. These spaces prioritise respect and equality among different age groups, with a focus to develop leadership skills.

Just as mosaics are pieces of materials pressed together to form one distinct creation, YWCA Safe Spaces are gatherings of people coming together to form one unique unit. The lived experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of each participant is what binds them together. Each Defining Standard is a fragment of a mosaic. While all of the standards are important in holding a safe space, depending on the space you are a part of, some standards may carry stronger weight than others. The size of the fragments are dynamic depending on the needs of the participants, sensitivity, or cultural norms. Certain standards may have more significance than others. In these instances, the fragment will be represented as a larger piece.

For instance, if the intention of certain gatherings is to discuss reproductive and sexual health issues in a community where those issues are considered taboo or illicit, the standards of Safety and Privacy, Trust and Community and Accurate and Reliable Information take priority. These conversations may be particularly sensitive, so ensuring confidentiality, safety, and that participants receive accurate information is of utmost importance. Not doing so may put participants in physical or emotional harm.

For another group, the goal may be to educate a community on the importance of political engagement. For these gatherings, the standards of Leadership and Participation and Intergenerational Cooperation may take priority.



## Build your own mosaic

As you plan the spaces you are facilitating, we invite you to use these mosaic cutouts to gain clarity around what participants may need from the space. For example, if the topic of the gathering is focussed on feminine health, the following standards may be prioritised: accurate and reliable information, intergenerational cooperation, leadership and participation, as well as aspects of dignity and respect. You can select the size of the tile cutouts as appropriate to represent the proportionate amount of standard needed in the space.

Some things to keep in mind:

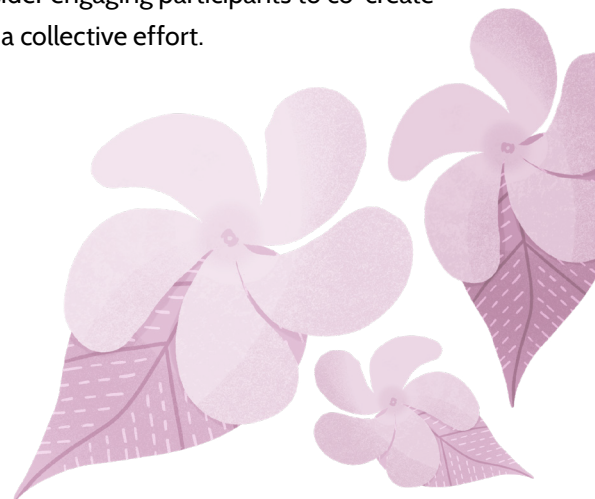
- Spaces evolve over time to meet the needs of participants. This means we may need to pivot our focus and/or prioritise certain standards to fulfil a specific need or meet a goal.
- Cultural norms and differences can influence which standards are prioritised.
- You may consider engaging participants to co-create the mosaic in a collective effort.

Refer to [Essentials for Your Toolbox](#) for an activity.

As you plan the spaces you are facilitating, we invite you to use these mosaic cutouts to get clarity around what participants may need from the space. The attention given to the Defining Standards will determine the experience that participants have. Keep in mind that highlighting specific Defining Standards that address gathering topics can help to alleviate conflict, increase participant engagement and create more impactful results. For example, if the topic of the gathering is focused on feminine health, the following standards may be prioritised: accurate and reliable information, intergenerational cooperation, leadership and participation, as well as aspects of dignity and respect. You can select the size of the tile cutouts as appropriate to represent the proportionate amount of standard needed in the space.

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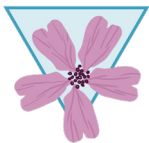
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- You may consider engaging participants to co-create the mosaic in a collective effort.





# Dignity and Respect

When participants enter into a YWCA Safe Space, the expectation is that they will always be treated with dignity and respect. YWCA Safe Spaces are only as good as the people within the space. This means the ways participants interact with one another are critical elements in creating and maintaining inclusion and belonging. In order for interactions to be authentic, it is important that the space is one where people treat each other with dignity and respect, while also supporting the open exchange of ideas. Dignity is the belief that all people are worthy of honour and respect. Respect refers to the deep admiration for one's abilities, qualities, or achievements. Expectations of the space can be discussed and outlined as part of the [Community Agreements](#)—regardless of whether the gathering is physical, virtual, or digital.



## Dignity and Respect In Action

Recently an organisation hosted a youth summit focussed on rural young women. However, the participants that joined were not only rural young women, but diverse rural young women. There were young women of different faiths, sexual identities, geographies, ethnicities, and levels of experiences. It was an insightful event to get to know the varying issues that affect young women. Even though the summit was originally intended to focus on one group, the hosting org was accepting of every other group of young women and curious about their lives and experiences. This created a positive learning experience and everyone in the summit.

## Promote dignity and respect by:

- Creating a welcoming environment by establishing that everyone in the space belongs there and their contributions are valued, sought, and important.
- Engaging in open dialogue to discuss how the group defines dignity, respect, inclusivity, and accessibility, and then setting expectations based on those definitions.
- Reminding everyone to use affirming language and communication that is respectful, clear, and without judgement.
- Promoting respectful attitudes and behaviours.
- Encouraging everyone to share accurate and reliable information and resources.
- Nurturing psychological safety by demonstrating value and appreciation for ideas.
- Avoiding terms that uphold gender stereotypes, stigmas, or hierarchy.
- Using language that is inclusive, non-discriminatory, and reflects the value of a safe space.
- Listening to others' points of view and acknowledging that there may be disagreements.
- Prohibiting yelling and the use of offensive or inflammatory language. Be mindful of your tone and pitch when talking.
- Ensuring that [Community Agreements](#) are upheld and applied equally to everyone.

# Accessibility

Traditionally, YWCA Safe Spaces were held in physical locations, and accessibility only referred to ensuring the space was convenient, central, and safe for the largest number of participants. With digital disruption and technological advances, accessibility has taken on a different meaning. Now, accessibility is about offering people across the globe—who otherwise would not be able to access traditional physical gatherings—opportunities to meet, share, and engage with others, as well as providing access to the information and support they need. While virtual safe spaces promote greater flexibility, reach, and inclusivity, it is important to remember there are many parts of the world lacking access to electricity, reliable connectivity, and devices. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact people's ability to access physical spaces, and has added new considerations about basic physical accessibility and safety.

Accessibility also means making sure spaces are accessible for people with varying physical and mental abilities. Doing so is essential to ensure participants' comfort level and ability to engage. That said, remember that no matter how hard you try to make gatherings accessible, those efforts may not account for everyone. However, by creating a culture of self advocacy within the space, participants can ask for what they need and the group can work together to provide further accommodation.

## Promote accessibility by:

- Hosting the gathering in a space that is accessible, central, and convenient to participants.
- For physical safe spaces, consider participants' physical constraints or restrictions, time, and financial costs involved with reaching and accessing the space. Would participants in rural, hard-to-reach areas, or informal human settlements benefit from participating?
- For virtual safe spaces, provide straightforward access instructions for anyone who might have less experience or familiarity with the platform or system. Remember, not all participants with technological capabilities have a safe or quiet space to engage.
- Ensuring instructions for accessing the safe space are communicated clearly and consistently to participants.
- Being mindful of technology limitations (internet bandwidth, download requirements, etc.) when selecting a platform and setting up a virtual safe space—especially for people in rural or harder-to-reach areas.
- Discussing the timing and schedule to ensure the gathering is held at a convenient time for participants.
- Offering multiple times to support the highest number of participants to join.
- Providing services or support such as childcare, transportation, or devices to reduce barriers to participation.
- Factoring in the size of the safe space or number of participants, as well as length of the gathering, to understand how that might impact the gathering.
- Ensuring there is enough time in the schedule so conversations are not rushed or interrupted.
- Asking participants about their accessibility needs and any accommodations to support their participation, such as language interpretation, closed captioning, and alt text/image descriptions on visuals and graphics.
- Scheduling breaks throughout longer gatherings. This may be particularly important for pregnant people, those with chronic pain, introverts, etc.



## Accessibility In Action

A local organisation hosted a leadership programme for young women and girls. The programme venue was far from the community where participants lived. The young women and girls had to take at least two buses and cross difficult terrain to reach the programme venue. To help, YWCA provided a transportation allowance on a daily basis, yet participants still found it difficult to commute since they could not return home in daylight. After participants shared their feedback about the commute, the organisation made a commitment to improve future programmes. Moving forward, programme venues were to be easily accessible for participants and provisions were to be provided for safe accommodation and meals. These changes would enable participants to fully engage without concerns about travel, safety, and time spent commuting to the programme.

## Inclusivity

YWCA's Safe Spaces enable all people—regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, faith, ability, or class—to join and feel comfortable, respected, and free to share openly. Safe spaces embrace and welcome people in all their diversity. Yet this inclusivity does not happen by accident. In fact, safe spaces are not fundamentally inclusive. Instead, spaces become safe and inclusive as a result of intentionality and a collective commitment to uphold [Community Agreements](#).

As a faith-based, feminist organization, the YWCA is grounded in progressive principles, including the values of inclusion and diversity. As a global movement that is part of the broader humanitarian sector, YWCA is committed to centering the needs of traditionally marginalised and under-represented individuals and communities. With this in mind, YWCA Safe Spaces exemplify and advocate for inclusion in all they do.

### Promote inclusivity by:

- Co-creating a non-judgemental environment by ensuring participants are engaged, have ownership in the space, and feel their needs and concerns are being reflected.
- Establishing and maintaining a space that is empathetic, accepting, and judgement-free.
- Promoting a culture where everyone feels comfortable speaking up without fear of retaliation, being ostracised, ridiculed, or excluded.
- Learning to tolerate discomfort and disagreement in a productive manner, such as listening to other points of view before responding, repeating key points during responses to show you listened, and explaining why you disagree.
- Remembering we can disagree about a lot of things—however, discussions that deny another's lived experiences or humanity should never take place.
- Establishing a baseline understanding (during the development of the [Community Agreements](#)) about how to enter the space and the type of language and/or beliefs that can or cannot be up for discussion.



- Ensuring each participant is responsible for creating an inclusive space. Engaging in the process of defining and developing the culture of the safe space gathering supports inclusion and belonging among participants. This can be done by incorporating rituals such as a group check-in, song, or meditation practise.
- Centring the needs of those most marginalised or who face multiple systems of oppression and inequality.
- Using gender-empowering language (instead of gendered or discriminatory terminology, phrases, and descriptions) to truly reflect the needs of the people coming to the safe space.
- Showing equality and respect to all participants, regardless of identity, background, or experience.
- Empowering participants to directly engage in the various elements of the safe space, including goals, planning, programming, and more.



### Inclusivity In Action

A young woman invited her friend to join her at the local NGO meeting. They were having a new training

programme on young women's leadership, and she was sure her friend would enjoy it. Her friend was nervous as she did not know anyone else there. Sure enough, when the friend went to the event, not only was she dressed differently, but everyone stared at her spiked blue hair! When it was the friend's turn to introduce herself, she felt shy and mumbled her name, failing to share any information about herself. One of the other young women participating invited her to tell the group all about her beautiful hair colour and another young woman asked excitedly about how she kept the spikes so fine. The friend realised that the others were eager to meet and get to know her. This allowed her to relax and before too long, she was laughing and enjoying the training alongside the other participants.

## Safety and Privacy

YWCA Safe Spaces prioritise the safety and privacy of participants by creating an environment where people feel they can engage, contribute, and speak openly. Everyone has the right to privacy and confidentiality about their participation in a space. This includes any ideas discussed in the space, as well as details shared about experiences, questions, or concerns. Simply put, anything shared in the space, stays in the space. Stories or experiences shared in a safe space among participants should never be relayed outside of the space without first receiving [consent](#). If any information or content from the safe space is to be shared externally, this intention must be explicitly disclosed at the beginning of the gathering, along with the option for participants to exercise their agency of choice. This also includes conversations taking place outside of the gathering among participants about things shared during the gathering. Think of YWCA Safe Spaces as a container for conversations. Inside of that container, a participant may be comfortable sharing a particular experience with the group. Outside of that container, the same participants may not want to continue the discussion or even engage with other participants from the gathering. Any discussions taking place outside of the gathering about ideas shared during the gathering should only occur once consent is obtained.

For safe spaces in the virtual realm, additional safety and privacy considerations should be applied. The goal is to protect people from being attacked or harassed, or having their sensitive personal information or data misused or exploited. Based on [Data Protection Principles](#), confidentiality and privacy agreements are important features to promote a culture of respect, empowerment, and agency while ensuring the safety of participants.

For a safe space to have meaningful dialogue and transformation, the psychological safety of participants is critical. Psychological safety occurs when there is a shared understanding among participants that they can be open and honest. Psychological safety is rooted in the idea that the knowledge and experiences of each participant adds value to the space. In discussions where psychological safety is present, participants are not hesitant or afraid to speak up and share their perspectives. Inevitably when discussing certain issues, there may be disagreements and tension. Psychologically safe spaces do not avoid different opinions—instead they encourage participants to be thoughtful and considerate when discussing, and to seek to understand different perspectives. Creating a psychologically safe space results in an environment where participants can show vulnerability and be curious—and this is key for a space to live up to its transformative potential!

### **Promote safety and privacy by:**

- Sharing information about digital best practises—such as digital safety, digital hygiene, data privacy and protection, cybersecurity, the prevention of cybercrime—to help participants protect themselves from cyberattacks, cyberbullying, and online harassment.
- Establishing basic security of the space whether in-person, remote, hybrid, or digital.
- Ensuring the [Community Agreements](#) explicitly state that thoughts and experiences shared in the safe space “will not leave the room.”
- Developing the habit of seeking consent before discussing what was shared in the space with other participants when not in the space.
- Seeking consent from participants before engaging in discussions about the gathering once the gathering has ended.

Learn more about Safety and Security through our [Feminist Consultation Methodology](#).<sup>6</sup>

- Explicitly communicating how any collected information or data (including recordings or images of the gathering) will be used and that it will not be used against participants in any way.
- Sharing how and what data will be collected during the gathering, how it will be used, who can access it, etc.
- Protecting the information or data shared by participants to ensure it cannot be misused.
- Considering ways to secure the environment and mitigate chances of the gathering being attacked or disrupted by online trolls and bad actors, such as adjusting settings to be private or invitation only, or disabling comments.



### **Safety and Privacy In Action**

A local NGO was conducting workshops with young women from the local community about recognising and preventing domestic violence. During one of the sharing sessions, one young woman spoke of her personal experience, and broke down crying as she shared. She then realised that several of her neighbours were hearing a deeply personal story that she had never told anyone before. One of the staff members understood this, and reminded the group that the young woman had shared her story on the assurance of confidentiality and the hope that the others present would support her through

this difficult emotional journey. The staff member also reminded everyone that they are welcome to approach any member of the staff team for further clarity and support. All the other participants reassured the young woman that her story was safe with them, and several even offered to check in with her on a regular basis to make sure she was alright. The young woman who shared her experience was relieved. Not only did she now have a space to share her experiences, but she also had friends who understood and supported her.

## Trust and Community

YWCA Safe Spaces foster an environment where participants can come together, share their experiences, and discuss their ideas, challenges, questions, and experiences. These spaces are a place to seek help and advice, share resources, access information, and learn and grow while feeling validated and supported. An atmosphere of trust is vital to participants feeling comfortable and safe to have open and honest conversations. This is especially true when engaging with someone new, or when the conversation is about private or sensitive issues. It takes courage to open up and be vulnerable, particularly when the experience is painful or shameful. The assurance of confidentiality and the solidarity that comes from connecting with others can help build the trust needed to share openly.

Many safe spaces follow a “no advice” policy unless specifically requested. Advice is welcome when solicited, but otherwise participants are encouraged to ask questions to understand better. This helps to bridge differences and promote belonging. When groups trust each other, participants are more open to sharing their experiences and supporting one another. Synergy occurs when there is communal trust and everyone feels valued. Trust and community is not built by accident. It takes time, intention, and consistency.

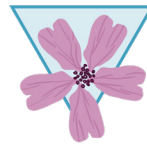
As the African proverb states, *“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go further, go together.”* When women come together in community, incredible things happen. Women investing in and building community with each other has contributed to important individual and societal changes and outcomes. Community is built by fostering connections among participants to discuss shared and differing lived experiences. The result is a group of people who come away with the knowledge and support that they are not alone. Safe spaces are self-regulated and self-structured, meaning it is the responsibility of each participant to add value and help build community. One of the key factors in building trust is to be authentic. Show up as yourself! It takes all kinds of characters, opinions, and ideas to make a strong, safe space. Who you are is enough and YWCA Safe Spaces want to see you as your full self.

### Promote trust and community by:

- Acknowledging we are all learning and unlearning. With that, mistakes will happen. When harm occurs, it is important that we take accountability to admit, correct, and repair harm. Do not centre yourself or your mistake as you work to repair the harm in any given, and instead, listen to the needs of those who were harmed.
- Confronting our own biases requires accepting the fact that we are imperfect and, like everyone else, internalise harmful biases and stereotypes about marginalised communities and identities.
- Ensuring safe space facilitators are trained and prepared to establish an environment that is non-judgmental and respectful.

- Facilitating and building mutual trust among participants to help them feel comfortable to share, ask questions, and engage in discussions about any range of issues, as well as help them see there are other people who can relate to their experiences.
- Encouraging the direct involvement and ownership of the safe space by all participants. This may include feedback, planning, implementation, and taking their own needs and concerns into account.
- Enabling open discussions through a foundation of consent and openness.
- Empowering participants to better understand their rights while forging connections with others to build community.
- Inviting participants to ask questions to gain greater clarity, such as, “Can you tell us more about that experience?”, “How can we support you?,” or “Why do you say that?”
- Offering and receiving gratitude for one another’s shares. There are many ways for gratitude rituals to manifest in these spaces, which may include expressing gratitude for individual shares before responding or dedicating time for participants to share comments of individual or collective gratitude before closing the space.
- Sharing and being transparent about the purpose of the safe space and YWCA’s motivations as a humanitarian organisation.

- Honouring trust and community by being accountable to rectify harm when it occurs.
- Showing up as your full, authentic self.



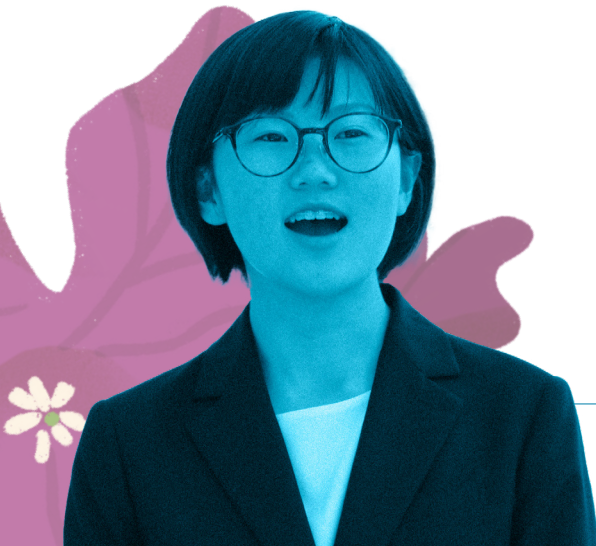
## Trust and Community In Action

A young woman visited the local YWCA where she was welcomed by other women. When asked the purpose of visiting, she became shy and unsure how to answer, so she did not speak a word. The other young women at the YWCA took care of her by inviting her to sit in a relaxing area. One of the young women who accompanied her shared information about the work of YWCA and offered support. The young woman realised that she can speak freely without fear in the YWCA because it is a space for women and girls. And she wouldn’t have known this had the other young women not encouraged her.

## Holistic Approach

A holistic approach to YWCA Safe Spaces takes into consideration that each and every person is unique. As humans, we are all impacted by a myriad of factors in different ways. We all have different lives, different lived realities, and different needs. Safe spaces tackle a wide range of issues that impact participants, including various aspects of health, education, rights, and more. To effectively address and tackle these issues, no one single approach works—a safe space must apply a multi-faceted or holistic approach.

To that end, some spaces are meant for learning, growth, and transformation while others are better suited for collective healing and care. This may mean in spaces where learning is centred, all topics are open for discussion—including topics that may be considered taboo





or sensitive. It is important to note while confidentiality and privacy are paramount in any safe space, particular caution and care must be taken around the discussions of topics that can lead to societal persecution. In spaces where collective healing and care is centred, the goals for the space might be to provide relief, support, and connection. It is also important to remember that processing triggers and harmful experiences can take a variety of forms. There are times when verbal communication is not the best practise for expression or understanding. A holistic approach accounts for other ways to engage and support participants, for example, encouraging participants to incorporate non-verbal activities like journaling, artistic activities, meditation, or movement during these times.

An important skill for following a holistic approach is the ability to understand how to hold space for oneself and others. Holding space for oneself requires an ability to focus on present needs. Sitting with emotions, thoughts, and sensations that arise can offer an opportunity to understand one's needs and build self-compassion and self-awareness. This is helpful in safe spaces to know when you may need to take care of yourself, take a break, or implement personal boundaries. There may be instances in safe spaces when you may need to self-regulate to manage your reactions and emotions, such as when holding space for difficult or unsettling experiences or ideas. For others, holding space means creating an environment for participants to be vulnerable. It requires empathy and compassion to centre someone else's needs and accept their truths, experiences, and decisions.

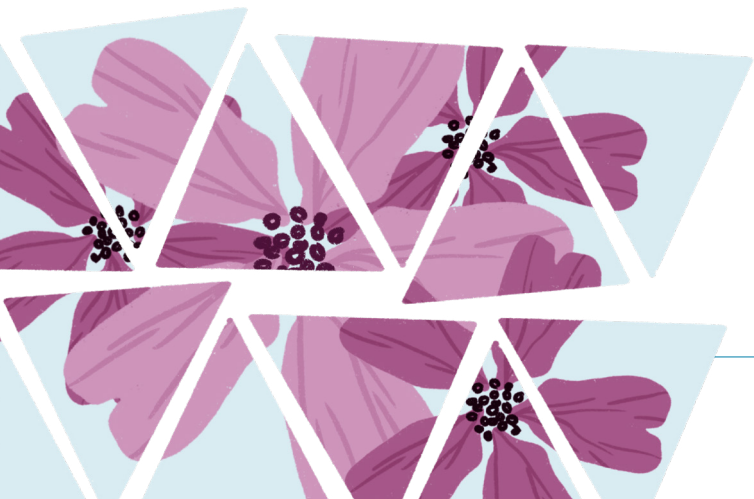
Holding space:

- Is a practise of being physically, emotionally, and mentally present to the experiences of yourself and others.
- Is not saviorship or an opportunity to problem solve or to learn for your own benefit. While it can be difficult to sit with someone else's pain, suffering, or sadness, the act of bearing witness to their experience can help them to feel understood and supported.
- Is a communal responsibility of the group where no single person (including the facilitator) is accountable for what takes place.

In taking a holistic approach, we have seen women adapt the YWCA Safe Spaces practise to become themselves a safe space for others. For example, an elder in the community provides menstrual and sexual health support to a group of young women who appreciate her wisdom and seek out her advice. Or, a couple of young women in the group develop a bond with one another and they form a deep relationship based upon trust and respect, building on the sisterhood.

### **Promote holistic approaches by:**

- Avoiding assumptions about other participants. Whether it is their sexual orientation, gender identity, or anything else related to their identity or experiences.
- Taking into account the various backgrounds, contexts, and needs of participants, and ensuring this is reflected in the relevant goals, planning, and programming of the safe space.
- Setting the intention to address various aspects that affect participants' lives, and not just focus on one.





- Providing holistic support to participants by considering the various aspects of their lives.
- Ensuring resources, support, and services are prepared, planned, and available for participants to access—such as accurate information, sexual and reproductive health care, skills development, emotional support, and more.
- Considering ways to encourage participants to interact, bond, and engage in dialogue and reflection with each other to foster connections and growth.
- Being mindful of new issues that may impact participants, particularly during periods of struggle, trauma, and challenges. For instance, mental health issues that have arisen or been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic and the accompanying times of physical distance or isolation.
- Allowing participants to speak without interruption and committing to active listening without needing to respond or problem solve.
- Honouring yourself by accepting that how you show up is how you are meant to show up.
- Being gentle with yourself and present with your emotions by practising kindness and self-compassion.
- Honouring participants in the space by not dismissing their experiences.
- Knowing when to give up space (get out of your own way) as needed.
- Allowing space to sit with the experience, your actions, your thoughts, and your feelings.
- Creating space for expansive growth and learning.
- Learning how to not take the rules to heart when it leads to inaction.
- For gatherings with faith-based participants, anchoring a connection to those values and traditions can be a powerful motivator that drives the mission of the gatherings.



## Holistic Approach In Action

As a local organisation, we deliver different programmes to suit the

needs of all women, young women, and girls. We provide life skills under the economic empowerment programme to our informal vendors, we provide leadership programmes to our young women, we even provide literacy programs for people of all ages who cannot afford going to a proper school. If we only delivered one type of program, we would not be able to reach everyone in our community.

## Partnership and Accountability

Safe spaces are a place for people to practise community and leadership, as well as develop accountability for themselves and others. Partnerships are an essential element of YWCA Safe Spaces. YWCAs are not only part of the communities they serve, but they engage and partner with values-aligned organisations, institutions, and experts at the local, regional, and global levels to achieve shared goals. Such partnerships are important to enabling YWCAs to offer holistic support and resources, as well as opportunities for skills development, growth, and connection to the women and girls.

The notion of partnership is also central to the relationship between the YWCA and participants of a safe space. True partnership can only exist through a non-hierarchical relationship that is grounded in trust. A YWCA Safe Space should be tailored to reflect the needs of the women, young women, and girls involved—and this can only be accomplished through listening and consultation with participants and the local community. Those involved can and must be empowered to make decisions,

enact changes, and have a hand in co-creating the safe space. After all, YWCA Safe Spaces aim to encourage participants to become leaders and changemakers in their own lives, their communities, and the world.

As a global movement, the YWCA is uniquely positioned in its ability to advocate for the rights and freedoms of women, young women, and girls. YWCA Safe Spaces are fertile ground to cultivate positive change in support of gender equality and women's rights. A strong commitment to accountability is key to creating impact, being effective, and upholding the trust and confidence of those who engage with the YWCA. This accountability comes to life through transparency, accurate and reliable information stewardship, openness to feedback, and responsiveness.

### Promote partnership and accountability by:

- Collaborating and sharing ownership of the space with participants to ensure they feel like active agents, co-creators, and leaders in the space.
- Speaking up if something happens that makes you feel uncomfortable, or you witness another participant feeling uncomfortable. If you feel safe addressing the matter yourself, do so, but if not, reach out to another participant that you feel safe confiding in for support.
- Ensuring the YWCA statements, vision, guidelines, strategic plans, etc. are made readily available and accessible to participants and the public.
- Being receptive to and providing mechanisms for feedback and criticism about any elements of the safe space (e.g. the facilitator, space, organisation, etc.).

- Soliciting input by listening to and including the perspectives of participants, as well as their local community.
- Ensuring the space is tailored to participants' actual needs (e.g., taking into account their social economic contexts, accessibility, comfort, etc.).
- Promoting collective versus personal accountability.
- Inviting participants to be directly involved in any and all elements of the safe space, to whatever extent and role they choose. This may include the creation, planning, set-up, and implementation of the space, such as the date and time, platform or location, issue areas, and types of activities.
- Considering ways to encourage conversations about accountability among participants, and facilitating discussions and agreements that support participants to be accountable to one another.



### **Partnership and Accountability In Action**

A young woman once came into a local YWCA office seeking help for a health problem. She explained that she was embarrassed to go to the hospital, did not want their help, and instead decided to come to us. Because the organisation has a good working relationship with a nearby clinic, we asked the young woman if she would be okay to speak to a nurse and doctor if they came to our organisation. She agreed because she felt comfortable in the space. The young woman received the help she needed and was on her way to recovering. She even went back to the community and informed other women, young women, and girls of how we helped her. Today, we have set up a small clinic inside their space to help women, young women, and girls in the community who are embarrassed to go to the hospital.

## **Accurate and Reliable Information**

YWCA Safe Spaces encourage thoughtful and open discussion as a way to build community and foster important critical thinking skills. By sharing and promoting factually accurate, evidence-based information, participants can access much-needed resources and make informed choices. The consequences for spreading misinformation can be tragic and uphold harmful practises and ideas leading to significant implications for participants.

A proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech has emerged and accelerated alongside the shift to the virtual realm. Unprecedented levels of engagement and interconnectedness through technology and social media make it increasingly easy for false information or harmful messages to go “viral”. This misinformation creates uncertainty in people and impacts their decision-making. The general solution to all infodemics (i.e., when it is difficult to distinguish between real and fake information) is strengthening critical reading skills and education. [WHO shares details about four main areas of intervention](#)<sup>7</sup> to infodemic management and how to reduce its impact:

1. Listening to community concerns and questions
2. Promoting understanding of risk and health expert advice
3. Building resilience to misinformation
4. Engaging and empowering communities to take positive action

Amid this backdrop, it is crucial for any and all information shared with participants to be factually correct and based on proven science. This is especially true for information about subjects considered to be taboo, shameful,



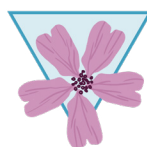
controversial, or politicised in some communities (such as sexual and reproductive health). Safe spaces provide participants with a learning environment to freely discuss subjects that might otherwise not be addressed. In safe spaces, participants have open conversations, and exchange information and knowledge. Providing evidenced-based information is crucial when encouraging and supporting participants to make informed decisions—especially when those decisions impact themselves, the people around them, and their communities.

When dealing with controversial or false information, safe space facilitators must address and course-correct the conversation by sharing relevant and accurate information. The accurate information must be communicated in a way that ensures the dignity of all participants. This might look like the facilitator exercising patience, modelling deep empathy, and maintaining an atmosphere of respect. To help navigate these moments, we included [Facilitator Guiding Questions](#). These generative questions use a strengths-based approach to help participants get unstuck and/or ‘neutralise’ the space during sensitive or challenging conversations.

### **Promote accurate and reliable information by:**

- Ensuring facilitators are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to guide and challenge any harmful or false messages.
- Maintaining high standards of information accuracy—based on science and rooted in fact—and underscoring the benefits of sharing facts before opinions.
- Remaining critically observant of any information presented, and addressing disinformation or misinformation directly.

- Engaging participants with easy-to-understand materials.
- Providing relevant and accurate facts supported by evidence—especially when dealing with issues like sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, and the pandemic.
- Acknowledging that it is also okay to not have answers and instead just sit with the questions.
- Promoting collective understanding that does not obligate teaching and/or emotional labour.
- Establishing ways to acknowledge, strengthen, and appreciate participants’ critical thinking skills, including examining sources of information, spotting inconsistencies, and other potential biases.
- Encouraging thoughtful and open discussion in a respectful manner.



### **Accurate and Reliable Information In Action**

A local YWCA chapter delivered was recently delivering a sexual and reproductive health session focussed on menstrual health hygiene. The facilitator spoke about the menstrual cycle and said that every normal woman’s cycle lasts about 28 days straight, and those who experience a different cycle timeline have serious health problems. A lot of the young women and girls in the session looked scared and confused. One of the participants raised her hand to point out that the information was incorrect. But the facilitator was adamant. However, there was a nurse from the local community clinic who had been invited to speak at the session. The nurse gently intervened to advise the group that while many women and girls may experience a menstrual cycle of 28 days, others may have longer or

shorter cycles. She even explained some of the reasons with examples to provide more clarity. The young women left the session feeling grateful and relieved to know more about themselves, their own bodies, and menstrual cycles.

## Leadership and Participation

YWCA Safe Spaces encourage participants to be vocal, honest, and open. Sharing is critical to the magic that happens in safe spaces. Having opportunities to give voice to your own experiences and ideas is central to developing the impact that leaders have in their communities. Safe spaces foster a sense of solidarity as well as catalyse self-confidence, personal growth, and self-transformation with the support of other women, young women, and girls.

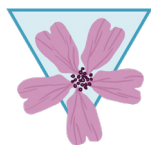
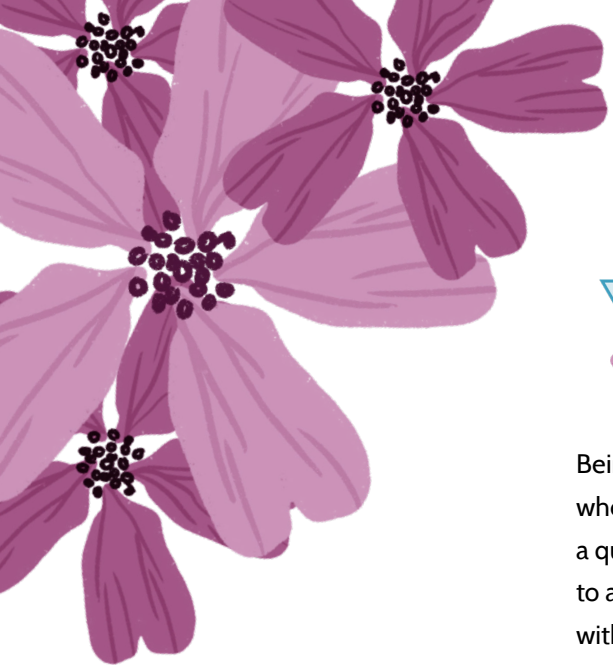
YWCA Safe Spaces are places for participants to develop skills, share their voices, and become leaders in their own lives and in their greater communities—while inspiring others to do the same! In communities throughout the world where women, young women, and girls lack decision-making power, these spaces are critical in supporting them to build and practise those experiences. Women, young women, and girls are encouraged to come to YWCA Safe Spaces to develop leadership qualities in a supportive, transformational environment. These spaces also provide opportunities for capacity building. Based on the connections and ideas nurtured in the space, participants have the opportunity to develop and implement projects in their communities.

Participation is an essential component of YWCA Safe Spaces. Fostering a sense of solidarity and ownership is key to transforming participants into agents of change. These spaces are best activated through full participation, so it is important to find ways to support participant engagement. This might include being mindful of the

accessibility and reliability of the virtual platform used for the safe space, the time of the gatherings, whether support services such as child care are offered, and so on. Facilitators can cultivate fuller participation using [Guiding Questions](#) to encourage discussion and consensus.

### Promote leadership and participation by:

- Supporting participants to build self-confidence and a strong support network by fostering an environment for them to learn about self-determination and agency.
- Consulting with participants to understand their needs as well as community relevance and ownership of the space.
- Ensuring the needs, concerns, and goals of participants are reflected and taken into account in the safe space set-up, programming, and implementation.
- Championing healthy power dynamics that reinforce the sharing of power, rather than a space steered by top-down directives.
- Finding ways to build consensus and remembering that silence is not agreement.
- Seeking feedback from participants by asking questions such as, “What needs to change?”, “What is working well?” and, “What should be done differently?”.
- Collaboratively thinking through and incorporating feedback to inspire buy-in and ownership of the success and sustainability of the safe space.
- Inviting other women and girls to serve as peer educators and mentors to provide examples and positive role models of female leadership, alongside mentors of other ages.



## Leadership and Participation In Action

A local YWCA chapter team sat down to have a discussion about the next month's programmes and activities. In the team, we have two new junior staff who recently joined.

Being new, they always like to ask questions to learn more. During the meeting when the team leader was delegating action items, one of the junior staff asked a question about deadlines. The team leader paused, and took a few moments to address the staff member's concerns. She also took a moment to check in with the wider group on whether they too had any doubts or concerns. She encouraged the team to raise questions when in doubt, and reminded them that it is good practise to do so. The team lead shared that their questions would not just help themselves, but also others on the team. She encouraged anyone to approach her or others on the team for further clarity and support.

## Intergenerational

Describes the relationship between and across generations. An intergenerational approach is grounded in respect for the lived experience of each individual, independent of their age, and what we can learn from them

## Intergenerational Cooperation

YWCA Safe Spaces are where women, young women, and girls can come together across all age groups and backgrounds. **Intergenerational** cooperation and exchange are essential to fostering resilient communities. These interactions are mutually beneficial for participants. They provide two-way support and role-modelling, as well as offer examples of impactful models for leadership development.

Intergenerational cooperation is deeply rooted in YWCA's beliefs. YWCA believes women's leadership must be centred to sustain a bold and progressive women's movement. Equally as important, YWCA believes that the women's movement hinges on the engagement and knowledge of women leaders of all ages from all generations. This focus on intergenerational cooperation speaks to the reality that everyone has an opportunity to both learn and support one another. Not only are participants from older generations incredibly helpful in shaping the development and learning of younger participants, but younger participants are equally poised to provide important support and perspectives for the development of older participants. By facilitating and encouraging collaboration, exchanges, and connections between participants of different ages, safe spaces can support everyone to learn from one another.

YWCA's work centres women's leadership and empowerment, and is anchored in the reality that women do not need a separate, isolated space. Instead, what is needed is a place where women, young women, and girls of all ages feel comfortable and safe to engage in intergenerational dialogue and grow together—and that is what safe spaces provide.

**Promote intergenerational cooperation by:**

- Understanding that while wisdom can come from time and experience, one's age is not a definer of wisdom. We all have a wealth of knowledge to share.
- Understanding that safe spaces are no place for mentorship, but for cross-generational connections.

- Ensuring equal respect and dignity is always given to all participants, regardless of age, experience, or background.
- Encouraging meaningful engagement from all participants, and ensuring all participants feel valued, supported, and heard in the space.
- Incorporating ways for participants of different backgrounds and ages to forge meaningful connections, build on these connections, and offer support to each other through advice, peer networks, mentorship, and role-modelling.
- Taking into account the specific needs and interests of participants given their different ages, and tailoring the gathering's programming and activities accordingly.
- Facilitating opportunities for knowledge exchange and transfer between older and younger participants. For example, women who are older sharing their experiences in discussions about sexual and reproductive health and other relevant issues can be particularly impactful for younger women. While younger women can be supportive and helpful in assisting and upskilling older women with technology access and concerns.
- Factoring in technology limitations for participants and ensuring those who might be less familiar or comfortable with virtual platforms have the support they need to fully participate. With the shift to the virtual realm, older participants sometimes face greater barriers to successfully accessing safe spaces. This is often due to older participants having less experience and familiarity with technology and digital safety, as well as social or cultural factors.







## **Intergenerational Cooperation In Action**

A young woman was appointed as the National General Secretary (NGS) in a YWCA. She has been part of the YWCA for over five years as a member and project staff before being appointed as the NGS. The first board meeting came and she had to present reports, programme status, and to the National Board Members. She was so nervous and did not know where to start. A senior board member stood up and assured her that it was okay to be nervous. This board member then stood by her side and guided her through her first meeting with the board. While helping her, the senior board member noticed and commented that the NGS was skillfully using so many new techniques in her presentation. After the meeting, the board member asked the NGS to teach her how to use some of the techniques. From this experience, both women benefited in forms of support and learning.



## **Safeguarding Mechanisms**

YWCA Safe Spaces are committed to safeguarding participants and protecting them from harm, all while providing supportive gatherings where people can flourish and be their authentic selves. That said, we must take steps to ensure the protection of safe spaces and what is shared within gatherings. Sadly, not everyone believes that these kinds of spaces should exist. Dedicated gatherings for women, young women, and girls—whether in-person, virtual, or mobile—can be targets for harassment. As such, it is important to anticipate and plan for interruptions and resistance. We safeguard our gatherings by supporting participants in understanding how to protect their personal digital information, take protective measures for in-person gatherings, and practise online safety.

## **Promoting data and digital literacy**

It is of the utmost importance to protect yourself and others when it comes to all things data and digital. This includes safeguarding sensitive personal information and data, securing devices, and ensuring data information won't be misused or exploited. Practising good digital hygiene—also known as taking steps to organise and secure your digital activities and workspaces—can reduce your chances of getting attacked, scammed, or harassed online. This is especially important in the context of growing cybercrimes and attacks from internet trolls and anti-rights individuals—many of whom target and invade virtual sessions with disturbing, distracting, and hateful comments and content. Within a safe space, facilitators can practise and promote data and good digital literacy by sharing information and resources with participants.

## Basic practises to protect yourself in a physical safe space

- Take note of any movement restrictions of the women in your area, and make accommodations to promote accessibility and inclusion whenever possible. Remember, a safe space does not need a physical location or physical interactions. Safe spaces can take place anywhere as long as the gathering respects the safe spaces Defining Standards!
- Discuss with participants how to safely reach the location, and find ways to address any costs (both time and money) of movement.
- Address health and safety concerns by providing masks, sanitiser, etc., and selecting a location with access to fresh air and enough space for safe distancing.
- Pay special attention to privacy by ensuring that uninvited people are not able to join or listen to what is being said.

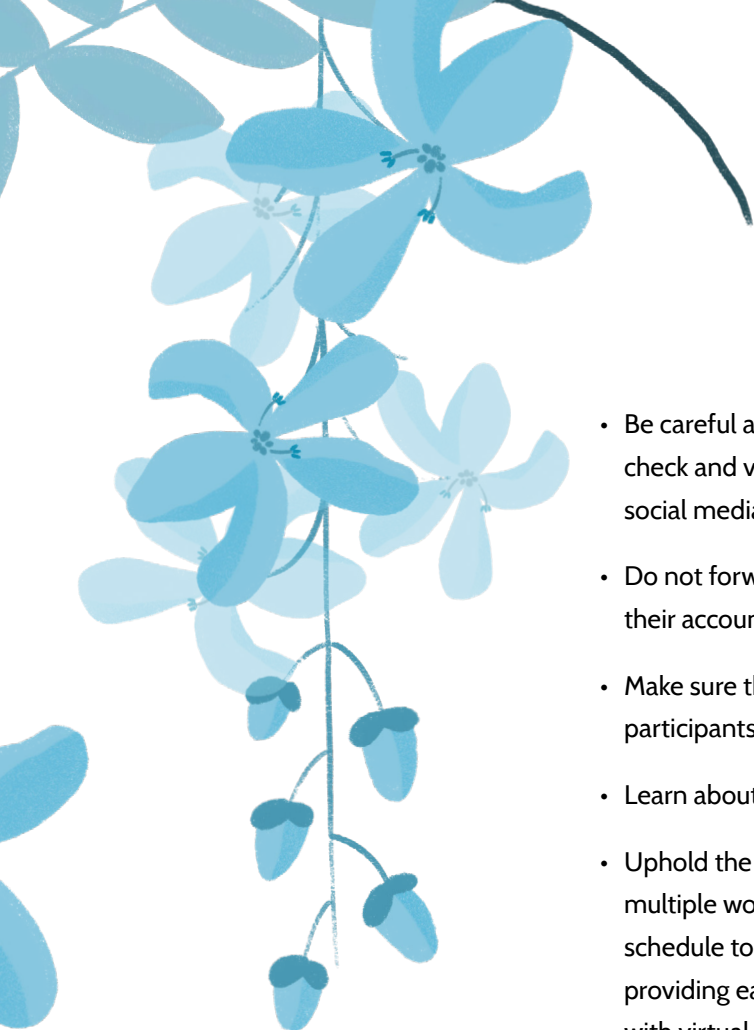
## Basic practises to protect yourself online

- Ensure your device systems, software, and applications are up to date, and that you have a current antivirus programme installed and running.
- Review your security settings on your devices and online accounts. Always add a strong, complex password. Do not reuse passwords, and consider using a password manager to create and store passwords securely. Do not share your passwords with other people.

- Limit permissions (e.g., location, microphone, contacts, who sees your posts or information, etc.). Be careful and selective about what information you share with other people and on social media, particularly sensitive personal data or information often used in online security questions, such as your birthdate, mother's maiden name, name of your first pet, etc. Do not give your personal information to any person or group without verifying their details.
- Create a privacy protocol to protect the space from intruders or scammers by establishing how the group will communicate with one another. Ignore all other communications that do follow the protocol.
- Do not leave your devices unattended when engaging on an online safe space platform.
- Always sign out of your accounts when you leave a shared computer or phone.



For more tips and insights, you may wish to read [\*\*World YWCA's Feminist Consultation Methodology's\*\*<sup>8</sup> Safety and Security - Online Platforms.](#)



- Be careful about what you click on and beware of phishing scams. Always check and verify the authenticity of direct communications in email or on social media. Do not open any suspicious links or unexpected attachments.
- Do not forward inappropriate content. Delete and report people who use their account as a platform for online bullying or violence against women.
- Make sure that no data shared in an online safe space can be used against the participants in any way.
- Learn about the signs of cyberbullying and how to defend oneself.
- Uphold the inclusivity of virtual spaces. Consider inclusive actions like inviting multiple women to connect using the same device, discussing the time schedule to ensure the highest number of participants are allowed to join, or providing easy instructions for participants who might have less familiarity with virtual tools. (This [blog](#)<sup>9</sup> offers tips on how to make virtual spaces more inclusive for seniors).

## Data Protection

Prior to the gathering, facilitators should consider security measures around privacy and data protection. Maintaining privacy and protecting data is a collective effort, and the responsibility should not fall upon one individual. This is especially true if there may be confidential and sensitive information collected during the gathering. We encourage you to do your due diligence to understand any established standards to follow for privacy and/or data protection based on your region or context. One example of data protection might be limiting access to the information unless explicit [consent](#) is provided.

Learn more about [Privacy and Data Protection](#)<sup>10</sup> in our [Feminist Consultation Methodology](#).<sup>11</sup>





# Restorative Care

Conflict affects each of us differently, which affects group dynamics. It is essential for gatherings to be spaces of empowerment—not rejection or self-doubt. To foster an empowering environment, facilitators and participants must work together to practise self and collective care as a shared responsibility. The YWCA sees restorative care as ensuring the well-being and emotional health of everyone in the gathering. This form of care aligns with feminist principles. It is about supporting individual and collective sustainability to nurture the resilient spirit needed for transformative change.

The responsibility to uphold care is shared by all those in a safe space, and often extends past the official ‘end’ of the gathering. Being part of a safe space means participants are actively exercising vulnerability when discussing and bearing witness to experiences. Sometimes, these experiences can trigger intense emotions or reactions within participants. In such cases, participants may need more time to fully process their emotions beyond the end of the gathering. Reactions requiring high amounts of emotional energy can arise from any discussion—especially ones involving violence, shame, or grief. Some participants might need to process emotions of joy, relief, and excitement. Others might need to process shame,

guilt, or sadness. In knowing that everyone has their own timeline for processing complex emotions, facilitators of safe spaces should share supportive coping tools at the close of each gathering.

It is crucial for the facilitator (or other designated participant) to follow-up with anyone harmed, triggered, or alienated by what was discussed in the space. As soon as possible—and at most within 24 hours of the gathering—facilitators should follow up to offer resources and support. The harmed participant’s experience should be validated and acknowledged if they were not properly supported or protected in the space. It is important not to assume what they need, or offer unsolicited advice. Instead, ask what would be supportive, offer and honour their request, if you can. If the harmed participant is unclear on their needs, it might be helpful to offer to brainstorm possible solutions together. Remember, the facilitator or other designated participant may not be the best person to offer support. And, if the harmed participant expresses that and chooses not to engage, their decision should be respected.





Not all relationships can be restored after harm has occurred –sometimes, it is not desirable, necessary, or even possible. Boundary setting can and should be a part of the restorative care process.

Offering support in the form of a listening ear is not a substitute for mental health services or other specialised supports that require training. It can be useful to have a list of vetted resources providing support for issues that may likely arise in safe spaces (e.g., sexual assault, domestic violence, addiction, grief, etc.) This ready-to-share list can help facilitators to connect participants with information and support from trained community and professional experts.

Practising self-care gives each participant the individual opportunity to process, reflect, and recharge. After participating in a safe space gathering, participants should be made aware that a range of emotions may emerge immediately or days later. Whenever those feelings might arise, here are a few prompts to encourage participants to take care of themselves and each other after the safe space gathering:

- Reflect on the reason why you decided to share. Instead of focussing on the outcomes, give yourself grace and remind yourself about your reasons for sharing.
- Take time to process your feelings. This might include going on a walk to reflect, talking to a friend, or journaling your feelings.
- Embrace what you've learned and remember that growth comes from discomfort.
- Do something that makes you feel confident or surround yourself with people who care about you and are trusted confidants.
- Celebrate your courage and growth privately or with others.

Restorative care can be like kinstugi (金継ぎ or “golden joinery”), the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by joining the broken pieces together with lacquer dusted in gold. This technique often creates an aesthetically appealing piece of art that results in finding ‘beauty in broken things’. Sometimes, in the process of repairing things that have been broken, we are creating something more beautiful, unique, and resilient. Learning to accept accountability and move forward is an important and powerful way to ensure long term sustainability of your gatherings.





## Essentials for Your Toolbox

By now, we hope you understand what YWCA Safe Spaces are and why they are so important. This “How-to” section offers practical support to effectively create and bring to life a safe space. This Guide provides a step-by-step process for structuring a YWCA Safe Space. That said, remember that it is designed to be flexible. While this Guide uses specific examples to illustrate recommendations, there are a wide range of activities and practises you can use. It is important for the ten [Defining Standards](#) to be followed, yet beyond that, this is meant to be a self-guided tool for women and girls in communities around the world to create customised YWCA Safe Spaces that reflect their cultural norms and practises.

# YWCA Safe Spaces Checklist

To support your YWCA Safe Spaces journey, be sure to review our [Feminist Consultation Methodology](#)<sup>12</sup> and [RiseUp!](#)<sup>13</sup> manuals for extra guidance on partnerships, sponsorships, funding, leadership development, etc.

This Checklist is fluid. As you create your safe space, remember that activities may not be sequential. No gathering is perfect and that's okay! Safe spaces manifest in different ways and that's what makes them unique.

## Phase 1: Prior to the YWCA Safe Space

- Defining the Objective of the safe space
- Choose a Location (e.g., format/type of space)
- Confirm the 'Type' of space (physical, virtual, digital)
- Ensure a Secure Environment
- Review [Defining Standards](#) and [Community Agreements](#)
- [Identify ways to practise MEL](#) (monitoring, evaluation, and learning)
- Invite Participants
- Select a [Facilitator](#)

## Phase 2: During the YWCA Safe Space

- Establish [Community Agreements](#)
- Navigate Conversations

## Phase 3: Closing the YWCA Safe Space

- Gather Feedback (as part of [MEL](#))
- Lead a Grounding Exercise
- Identify a Facilitator (for the next gathering)

## Phase 4: After the Safe Space

- Follow-up with Participants
- Integrate Feedback

## Phase 5: Do it Again!

You can access the [digital version of this checklist](#)<sup>14</sup>, a [printable version of the workbook](#)<sup>15</sup>, and watch a [tutorial on how to use the workbook via this link](#)<sup>16</sup> (opens a new window). You may also save a copy onto your computer so that you can enter information directly into the spreadsheets.

As we work to improve this Guide, we want to highlight and understand the experiences of YWCA Safe Spaces participants across the globe. Hearing from participants is key to knowing whether we are having our intended impact. We want to hear about your experiences! Please share them with us by writing a blog or [sending us an email](#) ([getinvolved@worldywca.org](mailto:getinvolved@worldywca.org)).

# YWCA Safe Spaces Workbook

## How to Use This Workbook

### Step 1: Defining Standards

1. Cut or fold along the dotted lines so you can easily refer to the Standards.
2. Review the [Defining Standards](#).
3. Articulate how the defining standards will show up in the safe space you/your team is hosting.

### Step 2: Review the Community Agreements

1. Cut or fold along the dotted lines so you can easily refer to the Sample Community Agreements.
2. Select a few Community Agreements that will guide your gatherings. You may wish to introduce all of the Community Agreements, select the ones that most resonate with the group you are gathering, or develop a few of your own.
3. Ensure that all participants understand and consent to adhere to the Community Agreements.
4. Remember, the Community Agreements are established during the first gathering, but can be updated at any time.

\* **Note:** In the future, if there are others who join the space after the Community Agreements have been established, it is still important to have them review and obtain their commitment. If it is appropriate, the group may wish to review the agreements from time to time and engage any new people for their input.

### Step 3: Determine the 'type' of space you are gathering

1. Cut or fold along the dotted lines so you can easily refer to the Considerations questions.
2. Determine the 'type' of space you are gathering in: physical, virtual, digital, or hybrid combination of any.
3. Review the checklist of questions to consider.

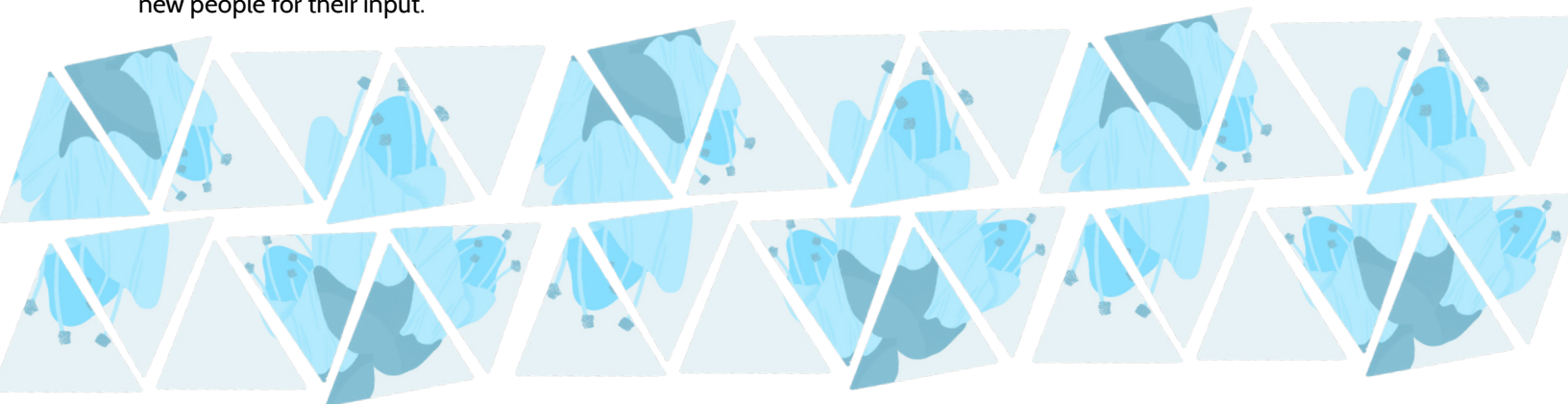
\* **Note:** These questions are not listed in sequential order and responses may differ depending on the circumstances. You may not have responses to all of these questions at the time of the Safe Space design, but it is important to think about how these questions are applicable to the space and how you will address them.

4. Share how you will uphold a safe space and create an environment for mutual accountability.

\* **Note:** There are 3 tabs specific to the type of space: all types (teal), physical (red), virtual (green), or digital (yellow). It is important you use the appropriate one as the questions differ slightly and build upon one another.

### Track Your Progress

We included color-coded tabs and bookmarks to help you track your progress. Cut along the dotted lines and mark each step as you go through this workbook.





## Step 1: Defining Standards

The [YWCA Safe Spaces Defining Standards](#) are:

### 1. [Dignity and Respect](#)

Safe spaces maintain a culture of mutual respect and dignity. These spaces foster trust among participants and serve as spaces where people can support, inspire, encourage, and validate each other without fear of judgement or discrimination.

### 2. [Accessibility](#)

Safe spaces take place in accessible, central, and convenient areas, locations, or platforms. These spaces uphold safety and privacy, and offer accommodations and/or necessary tools to ensure all participants have access. Accessible safe spaces prioritise outreach to remote areas and isolated communities using mobile outreach programs and rural networks, and use virtual platforms that are accessible, user-friendly, confidential, and free from violence.

### 3. [Inclusivity](#)

Safe spaces support all participants to feel free to share openly and be respected, regardless of their identity. These spaces embrace and welcome participants in all their diversity.

### 4. [Safety and Privacy](#)

Safe spaces ensure the safety and privacy of participants. These spaces uphold confidentiality about the conversations taking place, and seek consent from participants if any information or content from the safe space is to be shared externally.

### 5. [Trust and Community](#)

Safe spaces create the conditions for participants to come together, openly share their experiences, and discuss their thoughts, challenges, and traumas. These spaces build solidarity and trust among participants by maintaining confidentiality and ensuring everyone feels validated and supported.

1

Defining Standards

1

Defining Standards

2

Community Agreements

3

Determine the 'Type' of Space

cut or fold



# Safe Spaces Checklist: Workbook

The [YWCA Safe Spaces Defining Standards](#) are:

## 6. Holistic Approach

Safe spaces take into account the multiple aspects and contexts that affect participants' lives. These spaces provide information and services that are responsive and meet the actual needs of participants.

## 7. Partnership and Accountability

Safe spaces serve as a place for people to practise community and leadership, and to be accountable for themselves and others—especially the wider community. These spaces exist to ignite positive change in support of gender equality and women's rights.

## 8. Accurate and Reliable Information

Safe spaces share and promote factually accurate, evidence-based information that empowers participants to access required resources and make informed choices.

## 9. Leadership and Participation

Safe spaces led by women, young women, and girls offer secure, inclusive, and empowering spaces for participants of all ages and in all their diversity. These spaces focus on leadership development and inclusive participation as essential ingredients to empower participants to be agents of change.

## 10. Intergenerational Cooperation

Safe spaces encourage and create supportive relationship dynamics like intergenerational dialogue, sharing, mentorship, collaboration, and cooperation. These spaces prioritise respect and equality among different age groups, with a focus to develop leadership skills.



How will you commit to upholding a safe space?

Dignity and Respect

Accessibility

Inclusivity

Safety and Privacy

Trust and Community

1

Defining Standards

Clearly articulate the purpose of the Safe Space.

Purpose of the Safe Space

cut or fold



How will you commit to upholding a safe space?

Holistic Approach

Partnership and Accountability

Accurate and Reliable Information

Leadership and Participation

Intergenerational Cooperation

1 Defining Standards

cut or fold



Notes



## Step 2: Review the Community Agreements

### Challenge

Community agreements (sometimes referred to as “community norms” or “guidelines”) lay the foundation for an open, inclusive, and safe space. They are shared or co-created with a group of people to establish a commitment to one another and provide guidance for everyone to play a role in fostering participation, dialogue, respect, and trust building.

### Why this is important

Co-creating community agreements gives power to participants as they are more likely to feel responsible for implementing and upholding the agreements (as opposed to rules imposed by the facilitator).

#### Challenge

#### Why this is important

## Sample Community Agreements

- No one knows everything but together we know a lot.
- This is a safe space where we respect the opinions of all people without judgement.
- One voice at a time. We won't interrupt each other.
- We can't be articulate all the time, so give the benefit of the doubt and ask questions.
- Take space and make space. In other words, if you are usually quiet, challenge yourself to take more space. If you usually talk a lot, be mindful to leave room for quieter voices.
- Embrace mistakes and failure. They show us what we need to learn. Treat this as a learning experience and challenge yourself to learn new things.
- Expect unfinished business. There will be opportunities to finish these discussions at another time.
- What is shared here stays here, what is learned here leaves here. In other words, protect the confidentiality of fellow participants. Don't repeat something shared in a private or safe space.
- Work together to ensure everyone feels listened to and no one feels excluded.
- Lean into discomfort. Use dialogue to work together through conflict.
- We live at intersections, meaning we all benefit and are harmed by systematic oppression.
- We take care of ourselves. We are encouraged to stretch, eat, drink, use the restroom, take a break, etc. as needed.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms. Instead, use inclusive language that is accessible for people with varying knowledge.
- We live at intersections, meaning we all benefit and are harmed by systematic oppression.

2

Community Agreements

cut or fold



## Action

- Share this sample with participants at the beginning of the gathering.
- If predetermined agreements are selected for consideration, invite participants to review the proposed agreements. Then collectively add to or amend any of the statements.
- If co-creating new agreements, introduce this sample to help inspire participants in shaping their own agreements as part of a facilitated activity.
- Highlight the importance of empowerment. Community agreements must have the genuine consent of everyone involved. An 'agreement' isn't helpful if some participants do not support it.

If your safe spaces are closed or exclusively for a select group of people, remember to receive explicit consent from each participant prior to inviting any guest(s). If consent is received, also ensure that the guest(s) understands and agrees to abide by the community agreements.

### Ensure the facilitator(s):

- Clearly explain the purpose of a community agreement.
- Acknowledge everyone's needs are different.

## Action

## Sample Community Agreements

- Provide time on the agenda for participants to consider their needs.
- We live at intersections, meaning we all benefit and are harmed by systematic oppression.
- We take care of ourselves. We are encouraged to stretch, eat, drink, use the restroom, take a break, etc. as needed.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms. Instead, use inclusive language that is accessible for people with varying knowledge.
- Speak from your own experience. Use "I" statements when sharing personal insights instead of generalisations. Do not assume everyone is on the same page or has the same opinion.
- Listen to understand.
- Debate and challenge each other's assumptions and ideas. But don't challenge the person. Everyone's ideas are valid.
- Be conscious of intent vs. impact. No matter the intention, you are responsible for your impact.
- Be clear and plain spoken. When using terminology, make sure everyone understands what they mean.
- If you have a question, someone else likely does. Ask for clarification and don't make assumptions.
- "Nothing about us, without us." Be inclusive of others without tokenising, stigmatising, or disrespecting them.

2

Community Agreements

cut or fold



## Set Community Agreements

2

## Community Agreements

cut or fold



### Commitment to upholding a safe space

Pledge

Signature / Marking / Identifier

## Notes

## Step 3: Determine the 'type' of space you are gathering

### All Types

#### Ensuring Accessibility

#### Choosing a Space

#### Ensuring a Secure Environment

#### Inviting Participants

## Considerations for All Types

### Ensuring Accessibility

- Do participants have accommodation requirements / accessibility needs you should be mindful of?
- What other tools, resources, and accommodation should you include to ensure that all participants can access and fully participate in the session?

### Choosing a Space

- How accessible is the space?
- Is there a cost to using the space?
- Is the space welcoming and comfortable?

### Ensuring a Secure Environment

- How safe is the space?
- Do you need to take additional measures to ensure security and privacy of the space?
- If there are considerations around information ownership, has this been communicated to participants?
- What data do you need to collect from participants, and how do you protect the information that they share?
- How do you ensure confidentiality or privacy in this space?
- What guidelines or ground rules must you establish to facilitate a respectful and inclusive environment?
- Is there additional information you should share with participants that may help them in deciding if they will participate?

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3

All Types



## All Types

### Selecting the Facilitator

### Preparing Supportive Resources and Tools

### Information Usage

cut or fold



3

All Types

## Considerations for All Types

### Inviting Participants

- Who should the invitation be sent to?
- Are there specific language needs?
- Will the gathering be intra or intergenerational?
- How might when (timing) the gathering is hosted impact participants' schedule?
- What is the size (large or small) of the gathering?
- How might this affect the length of the gathering?

### Selecting the Facilitator

- Is the facilitator committed to upholding the agreements, goals, and objectives of the space?
- Does the facilitator commit to practising the safe spaces Defining Standards?

### Preparing Supportive Resources and Tools

- Has each participant been able to contribute to the co-creation of community agreements?
- What information, services or tools do participants need in order to feel supported in the session, especially when engaging with topics or content that can be triggering or emotionally draining?
- What resources can you prepare in advance?
- Are there scheduled breaks or guided practises available to the participants to utilise as needed during the session?

### Information Usage

- How will the information be used? Explicitly address how the data will be used, who can access what information about participants, who can purchase this information, for what purposes can the data be used, etc.?
-

Physical: Meeting in Person

**Examples:** Living room, faith-based gathering space, by the river, childcare centre, coffee shop, community centre, library, etc.

Ensuring Accessibility

Choosing a Space

Ensuring a Secure Environment

Inviting Participants

Considerations for Physical Spaces

Choosing a Space

- We suggest forming a circle to ensure that everyone can be seen and heard.

Inviting Participants

- What is the best way to reach participants (physical or digital invitations)?
- Ask participants to RSVP (be sure to send reminders).



cut or fold



Physical: Meeting in Person

**Examples:** Living room, faith-based gathering space, by the river, childcare centre, coffee shop, community centre, library, etc.

Selecting the Facilitator

Preparing Supportive Resources and Tools

Information Usage

3

Physical

cut or fold



Notes

## Virtual: Platform

**Examples:** Google Meet, FaceTime, WhatsApp, Teams, or a personalised video platform like on YWCA Social

### Ensuring Accessibility

### Choosing a Space

### Ensuring a Secure Environment

### Inviting Participants

## Considerations for Virtual Spaces

### Ensuring Accessibility

- Does your virtual platform include closed captioning?
- If you're using a slideshow with photos or graphics, have you included image descriptions?

### Choosing a Space

- Have you taken into consideration internet bandwidth, download requirements, etc.?

### Ensuring a Secure Environment

- If you need to record the session or capture screen grabs for any reason, have you first asked for and received consent from all participants?
- Does the platform allow you to adjust the settings so that the session is private, invite-only or password protected?
- What precautions do you need to take to mitigate the chances of your session being attacked or infiltrated with online trolls and others who intentionally try to disrupt online gatherings by sharing disturbing and hateful content?
- How do you reduce participants' exposure to potential cyberbullying or data misuse?
- How do you help participants protect their personal data and information?

### Inviting Participants

- What time zones and schedules do you need to consider when selecting a date and time for the session to ensure that participants are able to join?
- Are there additional security and privacy features that need to be enabled/selected?

cut or fold



3

Virtual



## Virtual: Platform

**Examples:** Google Meet, FaceTime, WhatsApp, Teams, or a personalised video platform like on YWCA Social

### Selecting the Facilitator

### Preparing Supportive Resources and Tools

### Information Usage

cut or fold



3

Virtual

## Considerations for Virtual Spaces

### Preparing Supportive Resources and Tools

- Is there specific training (i.e., how to use a platform) participants should engage in prior to the gathering to prepare?
- Are participants well-versed in digital literacy and data literacy? Is there an opportunity to share information and build capacity?



**Digital:** Application, Mobile, Desktop

**Examples:** Slack, Teams, Networking Apps, or a personalised mobile application developed by your organisation

Ensuring Accessibility

Choosing a Space

Ensuring a Secure Environment

Inviting Participants

**Considerations for Digital Spaces**

**Ensuring a Secure Environment**

- Verify users by requiring unique passwords.
- Protect conversations by using end-to-end encryption.
- Promote a zero-tolerance policy for cyberbullying.



cut or fold



**Digital:** Application, Mobile, Desktop

**Examples:** Slack, Teams, Networking Apps, or a personalised mobile application developed by your organisation

Selecting the Facilitator

Preparing Supportive Resources and Tools

Information Usage

3

Digital

cut or fold



Notes

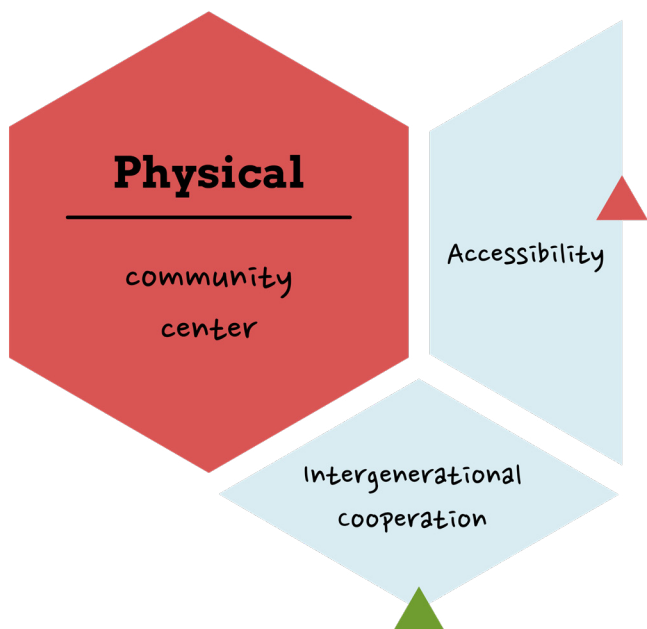
## Make a Safe Space Mosaic: Activity

As you plan the spaces you are facilitating, we invite you to use these mosaic cutouts to get clarity around what participants may need from the space. For example, if the topic of the gathering is focused on feminine health, the following standards may be prioritised: accurate and reliable information, intergenerational cooperation, leadership and participation, as well as aspects of dignity and respect.

As you participate in gatherings, you are contributing to building a community mosaic by laying your unique tiles to create a beautiful pattern. Here are some cutouts to give you a tangible way to intentionally design the mosaic of the space.

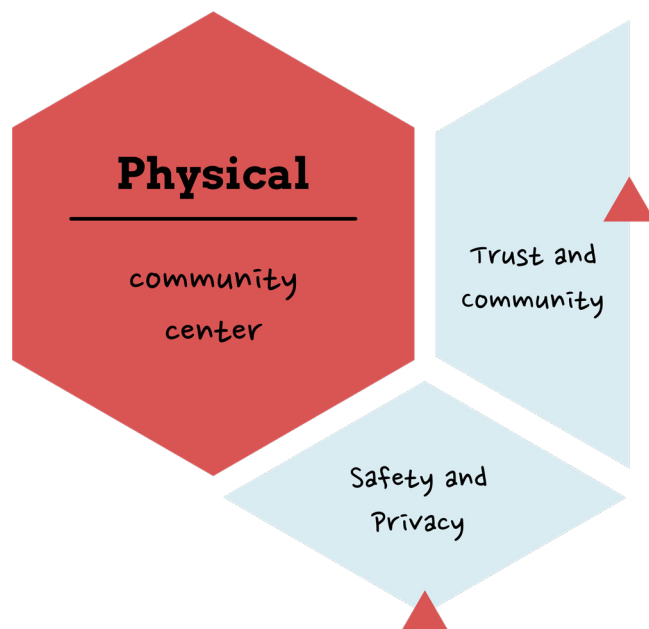
For example, we'll take a look at how Community A evolves from January 2022 to present day.

### January 2022



In a physical gathering to register people to vote, there may already be good Intergenerational Cooperation but accessibility needs to be prioritised.

### Today

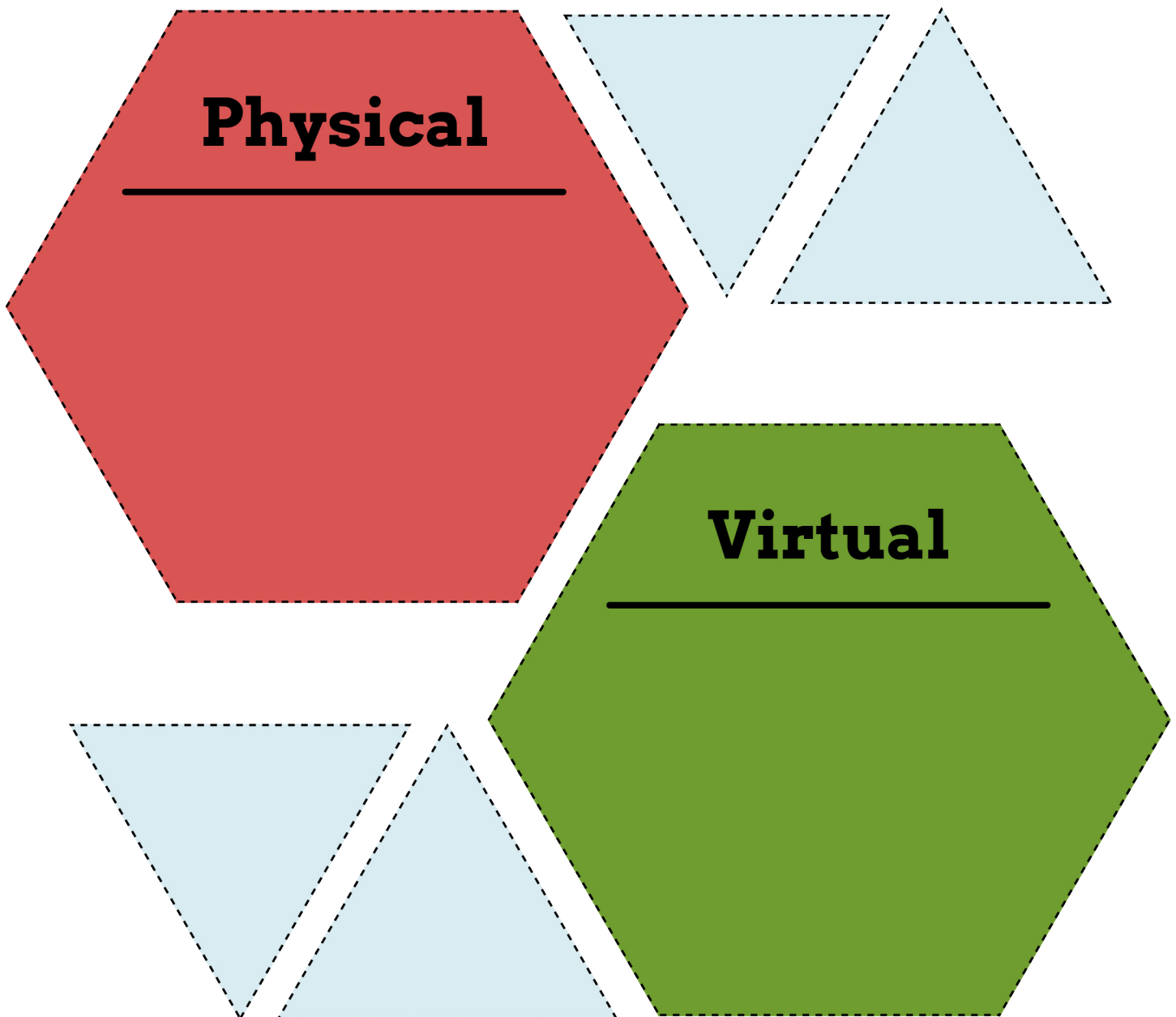


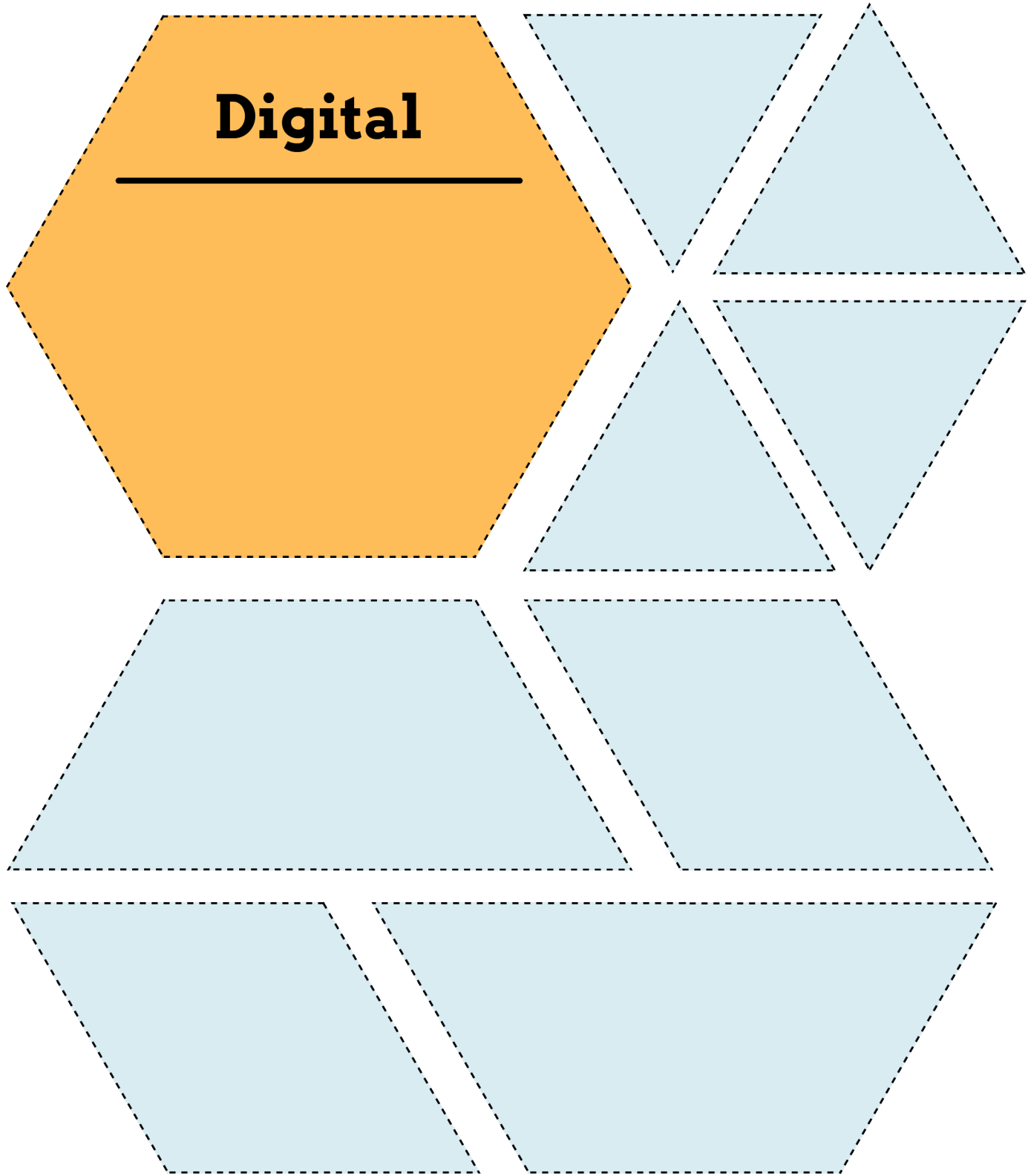
After meeting regularly for a couple of months, the gathering has evolved and is currently recovering from harm. Trust and Community and Safety and Privacy Community A's top standards.

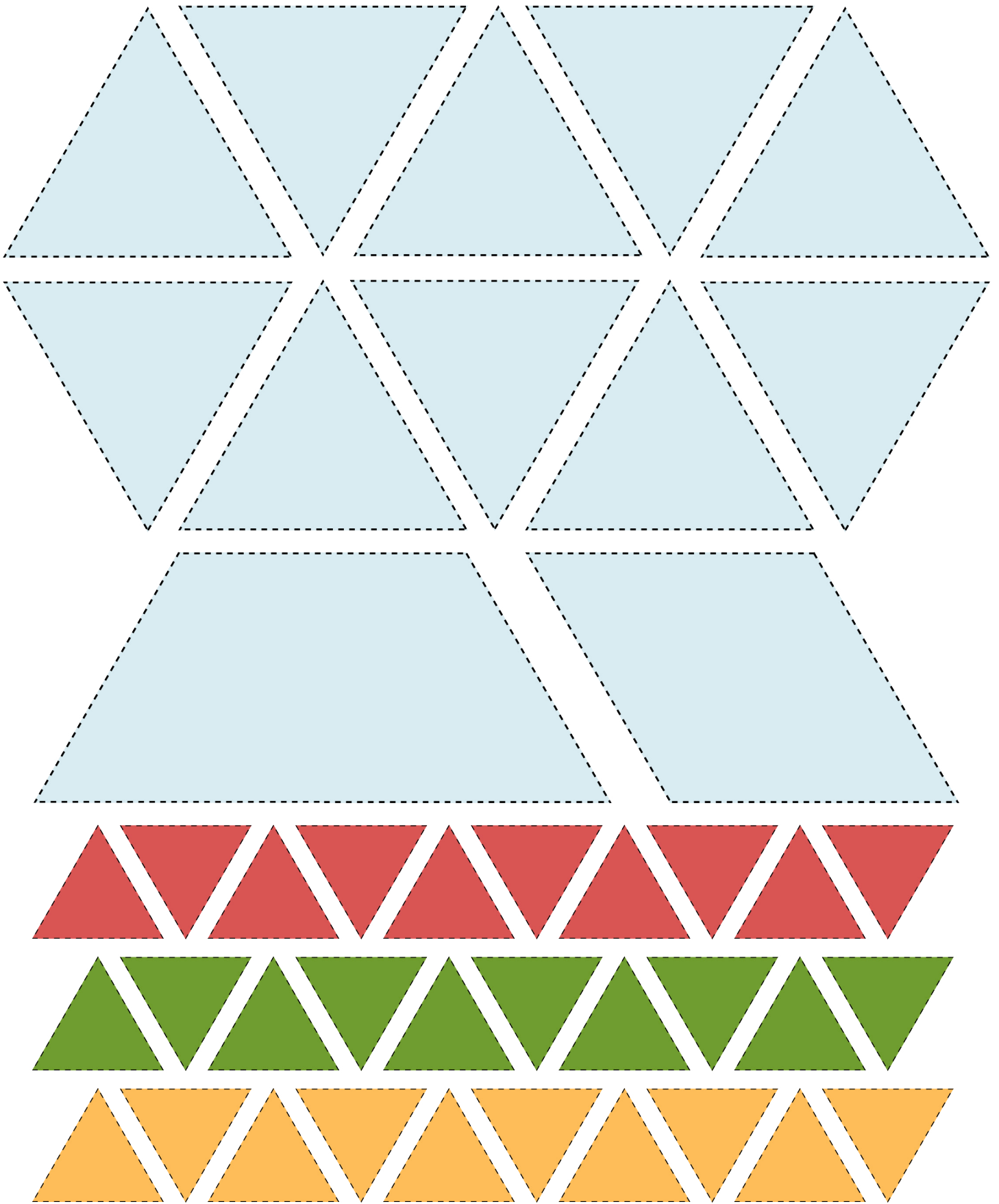


## How to Make a Safe Space Mosaic

1. Cut out the color-coded **Hexagon Tile Cutouts**. Each color represents a type of gathering: Physical (red), Virtual (green), Digital (yellow).
2. Cut out the **Light Blue Tile Cutouts**: Select the size of the tile cutouts to represent the amount of standard needed in the space. Write the Defining Standard on the tile.
3. Cut out the **Triangle Cutouts**: Apply it to any tile to mark whether the standard: needs further support (red), making good progress (green), prioritising (yellow).







# YWCA Safe Spaces Facilitator's Guiding Questions

The role of a facilitator can be extremely rewarding. As a facilitator, you are on your own journey of growth, development, or transition in community with the participants of the safe space! However, there may be times during a gathering when you need to step into discussions to steward difficult or challenging scenarios, such as:

- Participants feeling 'stuck' and the conversation has reached a point of saturation on a topic.
- Emotions are running high and participants can use a break or reset.
- Intense conversations or interactions are unfolding that require collective processing.
- Information shared in the space might not be accurate.
- A participant is speaking a lot and not leaving space for others to contribute.
- A participant is very quiet and not contributing to the conversation.

Regardless of the circumstances, your role is key to holding the safe space for all participants. You may need to intervene in an empathetic and effective manner.

You can use your voice by asking appreciative questions and taking a strengths-based approach to invite further dialogue as you seek to understand.

Below are some suggested questions to help you navigate situations that may arise. Feel free to amend the questions based on your experience, knowledge of the participants, and 'on the ground' reality of your community.

A couple of things to note:

- These questions are a starting point. Over time, you and your group may come across additional questions that prove to be helpful for your context. We invite you to share any new questions with us so we are able to add them to this list.
- You may find that you need to reference the [Community Agreements](#) to remind everyone of the commitments you each made when entering the safe space.
- Remember, everyone in the space has autonomy to advocate for their needs. Participants might not have responses to these questions and that's okay. Responses like, *"I don't know what I need"* or *"I would rather not share right now"* are absolutely acceptable. Facilitators can encourage participants to simply say *"I pass"* to signify that they do not wish to engage.

*If you come across a powerful learning, story, or additional questions during the gathering, we invite you to share it with us to help evolve this Guide. This Guide is a continual learning journey for all of us and was created by young women for young women.*

## Needing to provide additional support

- What do you need at this moment?
- Are you open to feedback or advice?
- How would you like to receive feedback or advice?
- What feels supportive to you?
- How can we as a collective offer our care and support?



### **Needing to pause discussion or call out misinformation**

- How is everyone feeling?
- Could we all use a break?
- What might help us understand this topic further?
- Are there sources of information and/or experts on this topic who can provide some perspective?
- Can we pause and postpone this discussion until we can gather more information?
- Are there things that can help you better understand this topic to make a decision?

### **Needing to move conversation along / be mindful of timing**

- There were some topics we were not able to cover from our last discussion. Shall we prioritise them so we can ensure we have time to go through most of them?
- Being mindful of time, are there things we have not yet covered that people feel are important?
- Given that we may not have the opportunity to go deeper into all of the topics for discussion during this gathering, what might we want to prioritise?
- Perhaps we consider moving topics not yet covered into a separate agenda, and revisit the agenda the next time we meet?
- We are near the end of the timing we have allocated for our gathering today, is there anything pressing that you feel needs to be addressed based on what came up in our discussion?

### **Needing to encourage participation**

- In the spirit of ensuring everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts, perhaps we can invite comments from those who have not yet had a chance to share?
- I want to give an opportunity to those who want to share. If you do not feel comfortable sharing now, that is okay.
- What are some ways people like to share? Writing? One-on-one discussions? Small group conversations? A drawing? I welcome you to share using a communication method of your preference.
- I've noticed that some people have not shared today. Is there anyone who has not spoken that would like to speak?
- To encourage everyone's participation, are there any suggestions for how you prefer to contribute to the discussion?

### **Needing to acknowledge harm and promote collective healing**

- In upholding the community agreement we set out for our gathering, I would like to acknowledge there has been some harm inflicted by our words. Can we all take a moment to acknowledge and address this?
- Would anyone like to participate in a breathing or grounding exercise?
- Does anyone need to take a break or leave the space?
- To the injured participant(s): How might we support you at this moment?
- Everyone processes and heals differently, would anyone like to share what they are feeling at this time?

## Needing to ensure accountability for transformation

- Does anyone have suggestions on how we might continue to support one another after today's gathering?
- How might we harness the energy we have shared in this space and carry it forward into our next gathering?
- We had some breakthroughs during our conversations today—what are some ways we can capture our insights and learnings to encourage growth and development?
- As we close out this gathering, take a few minutes and reflect on what continued support looks like for you. How might you stay connected with everyone?
- How can you be an accountability partner to provide support to others and take care of yourself?

### Notes

# (re)Building Trust and Resilience

When engaging in safe spaces conversations, conflict may and likely will arise. While it can be unsettling, when engaged properly, conflict has the power to strengthen relationships, serve as a catalyst to growth, and solve complex issues. In YWCA Safe Spaces gatherings, the goal is not to avoid conflict. If possible, it is best to address what may not be working in real-time to prevent future conflict. Having these conversations contributes to building trust and deepening group resiliency. By preparing to have these courageous conversations is never easy, but practising in an environment where we feel physical, emotional, and psychological safety helps them go smoother. When you feel ready to have the conversations, here are some ways you may consider approaching the topic:

- Sharing **specifics** about what triggered the thoughts/feelings by using 'I' statements

*When I see/hear...*

*I feel (emotion)...*

*I need/want/value...*

- Using **affirmations** of the shared commitments (and/or community agreements)

*As a group, we have committed to...*

*I know we care about...*

*Together, we have discussed...*

- Explore **options** of how you both/all can move through what happened-agree on, and commit to next steps

*Is this something that might work for you?*

*What do we each need to move forward?*

*How can we commit to \_\_\_\_\_ so that we can avoid....*

- Demonstrate **gratitude and appreciation** towards/for one another

*Thank you, I am so grateful for...*

- Requesting **concrete actions** without making demands

*Do you think it would be possible to...*

*Would you be willing to...*

*Could I ask if....*

- Validating your understanding by asking **clarifying questions** and being aware of your tone of voice

*Can you please tell me a little bit more about...*

*Would you be able to share an example?*

- Giving a genuine apology without being defensive-focus on the impact rather than the intent of your actions

*I am sorry for contributing to \_\_\_\_\_ and the impact it caused....*

*I understand my actions caused you to experience \_\_\_\_\_ and I am so sorry.*

- Checking **assumptions**, express **curiosity**, and ask open-ended questions to better understand the underlying behaviour(s)/motivation(s)

*Is there something going on?*

*I would like to better understand...*

*Is there any truth to...?*

*When I hear \_\_\_\_\_, this is my interpretation...*

- Sharing the impact(s) of the behaviour(s) or the consequences

*This impacted me/us/our commitment to \_\_\_\_\_ in this way...*

*When that happened, this was the outcome....*

- Responding to questions and only offer context if it is welcomed

# World YWCA Resources

- [We Rise, We Lead: Feminist Consultation Methodology](#)<sup>17</sup>
- [Rise Up! Guide for Young Women's Transformative Leadership](#)<sup>18</sup>
- [World YWCA's Glossary and Definitions](#)<sup>19</sup>
- [Changing Narratives Around Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights \(SRHR\) and Mental Health](#)<sup>20</sup>
- [Envisioning Goal 2035](#)<sup>21</sup>
- [World YWCA's Virtual Safe Space](#)<sup>22</sup>

## Acknowledgements

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- Providing safe spaces is part of the legacy of YWCA leaders around the world. This revised Guide would not have been possible without the lived experience of women, young women, and girls in more than 100 countries around the world. We would like to thank the thousands of women and young women facilitators and participants who informed our knowledge on safe spaces through their implementation efforts on the ground in their communities.
- The revision process for the World YWCA Safe Spaces Guide began with an in-depth evidence-based approach led by Irene Annachiara Petraoli. The consultative and research process involved engagements with YWCA leaders from around the world, including YWCA's from Philippines, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, Belarus, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Japan, and Ukraine.
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- Two-year consultative process was facilitated under the leadership of various World YWCA team members, including Dr. Suchi Gaur, Nirmala Gurung and Talisa Avanthay.



## Endnotes

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