

Safe spaces for adolescent girls: a panacea or platform?

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"Safe spaces" are an increasingly utilised approach for reaching adolescent girls in Africa. Typically delivered through structured group sessions led by trained women mentors in community or school-adjacent settings, they aim to build trusted relationships, life skills, agency, and, sometimes, link girls to education, health, and economic opportunities. Their appeal reflects both the limited availability of supportive, girl-centred spaces and the perceived advantages of a relatively low-cost, flexible model feasible across diverse contexts.

In a world of constrained financing, pressure is mounting to identify impact and value for money at scale. The question is no longer whether safe spaces have value—they do—but whether they can deliver meaningful, cost-effective impact at scale, with sufficient quality and intensity, and in ways that reflect the heterogeneity of adolescent girls' lives.

Across settings, evidence suggests that well-implemented safe spaces with robust life skills components can strengthen girls' social assets, peer networks, self-efficacy, and agency.¹ These capabilities are foundational, shaping girls' life trajectories. Few evaluations assess standalone safe space interventions, but this evidence suggests that, on their own, safe spaces rarely deliver sustained, population-level reductions in child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, school dropout, or poverty. Where such outcomes improve, they typically do so when safe spaces are combined or "bundled" with complementary interventions that address the structural, economic, and social drivers shaping girls' lives. It is these bundled approaches that provide the strongest evidence of change.²

Indeed, when used as platforms for additional inputs, such as sexual and reproductive health information and services, accelerated learning, vocational training, or economic opportunities, safe spaces can help remove barriers to schooling, improve service quality, strengthen social protection, and engage the gatekeepers who shape girls' mobility and decisions. They can also support girls to challenge harmful norms

and contribute to broader, more durable shifts toward gender equality.

In northern Nigeria, *Pathways to Choice* combined safe spaces with community engagement, accelerated education, life skills, in-kind educational support, and vocational training, increasing school enrolment and delaying marriage among out-of-school girls.³ Programs in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda that used safe space platforms embedded in broader multisectoral packages contributed to improvements in schooling, economic participation, and to reductions in early marriage and adolescent pregnancy.^{4–6}

But contextual responsiveness is essential. Programming focused on delaying marriage is irrelevant for already married girls, whose priorities centre on livelihoods, reproductive health, and childcare support.⁷ Among unmarried girls, age, schooling status, and setting matter. In urban settings, for example, where enrolment may already be high, safe spaces may support transitions to secondary school, while in rural or marginalized contexts, the primary challenge may be girls' entry into schooling. Experience from fragile and conservative settings suggests that early and sustained engagement with families, community and religious leaders, and other gatekeepers, are critical, though evidence from these contexts remains limited.⁸

Implementation quality is as important as programme design. When Uganda's successful ELA programme was replicated in Tanzania using the same curriculum, it showed little impact because implementation systems collapsed; mentors lacked supervision, materials, and adequate spaces.⁹

Successful programmes invest in mentor selection, training, supervision, and relationships; ensure adequate materials and girl-informed selection of safe spaces; monitor implementation fidelity; and adapt content to girls' age, marital status, schooling, and context.¹⁰ Enrolling a substantial share of eligible girls within communities and ensuring their inputs in programme design and implementation can reduce isolation, ensure relevance, and support norm change.

Crucially, safe spaces cannot substitute structural change. While gains in girls' confidence and agency, alongside shifts in community norms, can increase acceptance of girls' rights and voice, these changes alone cannot keep girls in school or create viable economic alternatives to child marriage. Linking safe

The Lancet Regional
Health - Africa
2026;■: 100036

Published Online XXX
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanafr.2026.100036>

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Panel 1: Implications for policy and practice.

- *Design contextually adapted, age-segmented programmes* that respond to the differing needs of girls by marital status, schooling, location, as well as local norms, constraints, services, and lived realities.
- *Prioritize implementation quality*, including mentor training and oversight, materials, and spaces, while monitoring fidelity and participation.
- *Measure progress realistically*, using short-term indicators while investing in longer-term research to understand pathways of change.
- *Calibrate expectations*, valuing safe spaces for what they reliably deliver—social assets, agency, and ideally, expanded opportunities for girls—especially when bundled with other interventions.

spaces to stronger education systems, adolescent-responsive health services, social protection, and market-relevant livelihoods pathways is therefore central to achieving lasting impact at scale. In short, safe spaces should be understood primarily as *platforms* for reaching and supporting girls, not as comprehensive solutions in themselves. **Panel 1** presents some additional insights for policymakers and practitioners.

Safe spaces remain a valuable tool for advancing adolescent girls' health, rights, and wellbeing amid widening inequalities and constrained resources. But their impact depends on how they are designed and implemented. Delivered in isolation or at low quality, they risk being an insufficient response to deeply rooted challenges. Embedded within well-resourced, context-responsive, multi-sectoral strategies, however, safe spaces can play a catalytic role in expanding girls' choices, strengthening their agency, and enabling lasting change.

Declaration of interests

All authors declare no competing interests.

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