

# AWYAD's Community-Based Safe Spaces: Protecting and Empowering Women and Girls in Nakivale Refugee Settlement

## Introduction

The creation of Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) has emerged as a critical strategy for the protection and empowerment of women and girls affected by conflict and displacement. In refugee settings, where risks of gender-based violence (GBV) are heightened, safe spaces provide a sanctuary for healing, support, and empowerment. AWYAD (Action for Women and Youth Advancement and Development) has pioneered a community-based safe space approach in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, addressing the unique challenges of providing protection services in an environment without formal safe space facilities. Unlike traditional facility-based safe spaces, which require dedicated infrastructure, AWYAD's model leverages existing community structures, including large tree shades and local churches, to create spaces where women and girls can gather, share experiences, access psychosocial support, and build resilience. This article explores the unique features of AWYAD's approach, its impact on survivors, and success stories that illustrate the transformative power of community-driven protection interventions.



GBV survivors at a Women's Safe Space in Juru Zone in Nakivale Refugee Settlement

## Unique Features of AWYAD's Community-Based Safe Space Approach

### 1. Leveraging Community Infrastructure

AWYAD's approach is tailored to Nakivale's specific context, where formal safe spaces do not exist. Instead of constructing new facilities, AWYAD has adapted local tree shades, churches, and community halls as safe spaces where women and girls can meet in a secure and familiar environment. These spaces serve as hubs for healing, counselling, skills training, and peer support, all within a setting that integrates naturally into the community.

### 2. A Survivor-Centered Approach

The community-based safe spaces prioritize the needs and voices of survivors. Women and girls participating in the program are actively involved in designing and implementing activities, ensuring that services are relevant, culturally sensitive, and responsive to their lived realities. This approach fosters ownership, trust, and a sense of belonging, making survivors more likely to seek and benefit from the services offered.

### 3. Mobile Outreach and Flexibility

One of the most innovative aspects of AWYAD's approach is its flexibility and mobility. Trained community facilitators, many of whom are GBV survivors, conduct mobile outreach sessions that extend protection services beyond static locations. This flexibility is crucial for reaching women and girls in remote areas of Nakivale, where movement may be restricted due to security concerns or household responsibilities.

### 4. Integrated Support Services

Each safe space serves as a multifunctional hub, providing a holistic approach to the well-being of women and girls. Psychosocial support and trauma healing sessions are led by trained counselors, offering survivors a safe environment to express their emotions and receive professional guidance on their recovery journey. Legal aid and GBV case management ensure that survivors have access to justice and protection, helping them navigate legal systems that often feel intimidating or inaccessible. To promote financial independence, economic empowerment programs equip women with vocational training in tailoring, soap making, and business skills, enabling them to generate income and support their families. Additionally, health and reproductive rights education empowers women and girls with essential knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, ensuring they can make informed decisions about their bodies and well-being. Community dialogues and awareness sessions also play a critical role in shifting harmful gender norms and engaging men as allies in the fight against GBV.

### Impact of the Community-Based Safe Space Approach

Since the introduction of AWYAD's community-based safe spaces in Nakivale, the program has yielded significant positive outcomes. Women and girls have gained the confidence to report cases of gender-based violence, fostering a culture of trust and accountability within the community. The safe spaces have also contributed to improved mental health and well-being, with many survivors reporting reduced trauma symptoms, greater self-confidence, and stronger social support networks. Economic empowerment programs have enabled survivors to transition into self-sustaining livelihoods, reducing their vulnerability to exploitation and financial dependence.

These safe spaces have also strengthened community networks, creating a support system where women can rely on each other for encouragement and guidance. Additionally, male engagement initiatives have successfully challenged deep-seated gender norms, leading to a decline in domestic violence cases and increased support for women's rights within the community.

## Success Stories: Voices of Transformation

### 1. Grace's Journey to Healing and Empowerment



Grace Ngalula a beneficiary of the Women's Safe Space in Juru Zone in Nakivale Refugee Settlement

Grace, a 32-year-old refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, arrived in Nakivale after fleeing sexual violence in her home country. Isolated and traumatized, she struggled to cope with the emotional and physical scars of her experience. When she learned about AWYAD's community-based safe spaces, she hesitated but eventually joined a peer support group under a large mango tree in her village.

through regular counselling sessions and empowerment training, Grace regained her confidence and self-worth. She enrolled in AWYAD's tailoring program, received a startup kit, and now runs her own small business sewing dresses for women in her community. Today, Grace is not only financially independent but also an advocate for GBV survivors, mentoring other women who have experienced similar hardships.

### 2. The Strength of Collective Support: Mariam's Story (no picture consent)

Mariam, a 19-year-old South Sudanese refugee, was forced into an early marriage at the age of 15. She endured years of domestic violence before escaping to Nakivale with her infant son. With no formal education or job prospects, she felt hopeless about her future. At AWYAD's safe space in a local church, Mariam found a sisterhood of women who shared her experiences and encouraged her to start anew. She received business training and a small grant to start a food vending business. Today, she earns enough to support herself and her child. More importantly, she has found her voice and agency, speaking out against child marriage in community dialogue sessions.

### 3. Clarisa's Story: A Young Girl's Path to Safety and Hope (no picture consent)

Clarisa, a 15-year-old refugee from Burundi, arrived in Nakivale after escaping an abusive home. Having lost her parents at a young age, she was forced into domestic servitude by relatives, enduring years of mistreatment. She had little access to education and feared for her future. Upon learning about AWYAD's community-based safe spaces from a peer, she joined a support group under a large tree in her village. With encouragement from mentors, she enrolled in AWYAD's education support program and began attending literacy classes. Through continuous counseling and empowerment sessions, Clarisa gradually regained confidence. Today, she is thriving academically and aspires to become a teacher. The safe space has given her hope, a support network, and the opportunity to rebuild her life, proving that young girls, even in the most challenging circumstances, can create a better future with the right support.

Grace Ngalula a beneficiary of the Women's Safe Space in Juru Zone in Nakivale Refugee Settlement

#### A Model for Replication

AWYAD's community-based safe space approach in Nakivale Refugee Settlement demonstrates how innovative, locally adapted solutions can provide essential protection and empowerment services in resource-limited settings. By leveraging existing community structures, prioritizing survivor-centered interventions, and engaging the wider community, AWYAD has successfully created a sustainable model that fosters healing, economic resilience, and social change. As AWYAD continues to expand this initiative, there is great potential for scaling this approach to other refugee settlements and conflict-affected communities, ensuring that all women and girls have access to safe, empowering spaces where they can reclaim their dignity, heal, and thrive.