




**SELF-DETERMINATION AND SAFETY**

**RESPECTING  
SELF-DETERMINATION  
ACKNOWLEDGES  
A YOUNG WOMAN'S  
EXPERTISE AND  
SUPPORTS HER AS SHE  
SHAPES HER FUTURE.**

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**I AM WHY.** YOUNG WOMEN  
LEAD THE WAY TO JUSTICE



I am my  
aborigines ancestor  
fighting for my next generation  
to be free with my loud mouth,  
chocolate skin, and the  
power of struggle in my tone  
and mommy in my background  
so strong, and rude

I am why we will no longer  
be invisible

- Joemine



## JAZMINE: A SELF-DETERMINED VOICE FOR SAFETY.

“When I was younger, the future I imagined for myself was. . . something special. . . . I know I wanted to have a family, because I’d never had one, so I imagined that. I know I always imagined myself being able to speak my voice and use my voice for powerful things, especially for chocolate women. So, I imagined that for my future and I also imagined being able to feel safe and secure in my life.

“I feel the system has failed me. . . . I had to go through the struggles of running away. I’ve been through 20 placements. And this was from my time of being from 12 until 17. And from 17, in those times, when I was pregnant with my daughter, I was in five different placements just in that time of my pregnancy.

“When they was placing me in all these homes, wasn’t nobody calling me and seeing how I was doing. I remember calling the ombudsmen and telling them that I didn’t have no food in the refrigerator. They didn’t even come out until next month, after the lady done choked out the other girl. And I’m like, ‘Why do you have to wait until something tragic happens to understand? I’ve been telling you something was wrong.’”

– Jazmine

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY PAVES THE WAY TO SELF-DETERMINATION.**

Often, safety is talked about as it relates to physical well-being. But it also applies to psychological well-being. When it comes to the healthy development of girls and young women, feeling safe psychologically is just as critical as feeling safe physically. When girls feel safe, they are enabled to develop their individual strengths and identities, as well as empowered to determine the course of their lives.

## **WHEN GIRLS FEEL PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNSAFE: THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES.**

Studies have shown that girls and young women experience threats to their sense of safety disproportionately to boys. Everything from instability within the home to sexual harassment in school cause trauma and jeopardize a girl's sense of security and psychological safety, especially if the experience is unmediated by adult support.

**“Why do you have to wait until something tragic happens to understand? I’ve been telling you something was wrong.”**

– Jazmine



## A GIRL CAN FEEL PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNSAFE WHEN SHE EXPERIENCES:

Racism

Sexism

Instability within her home

Unstable housing or frequent movement within the foster system

Violence within her community

Sexual abuse

Trafficking

Harassment due to her sexual identity

Social or sexual harassment in school

A lack of sensitivity to her emotional distress — an issue that's pervasive for girls of color

Juvenile or criminal justice system contact



## A GIRL WHO DOES NOT FEEL PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE CAN FACE LIFELONG CHALLENGES AND IS MORE LIKELY TO:

Feel unhappy or depressed

Lack self-confidence

Have trouble in school

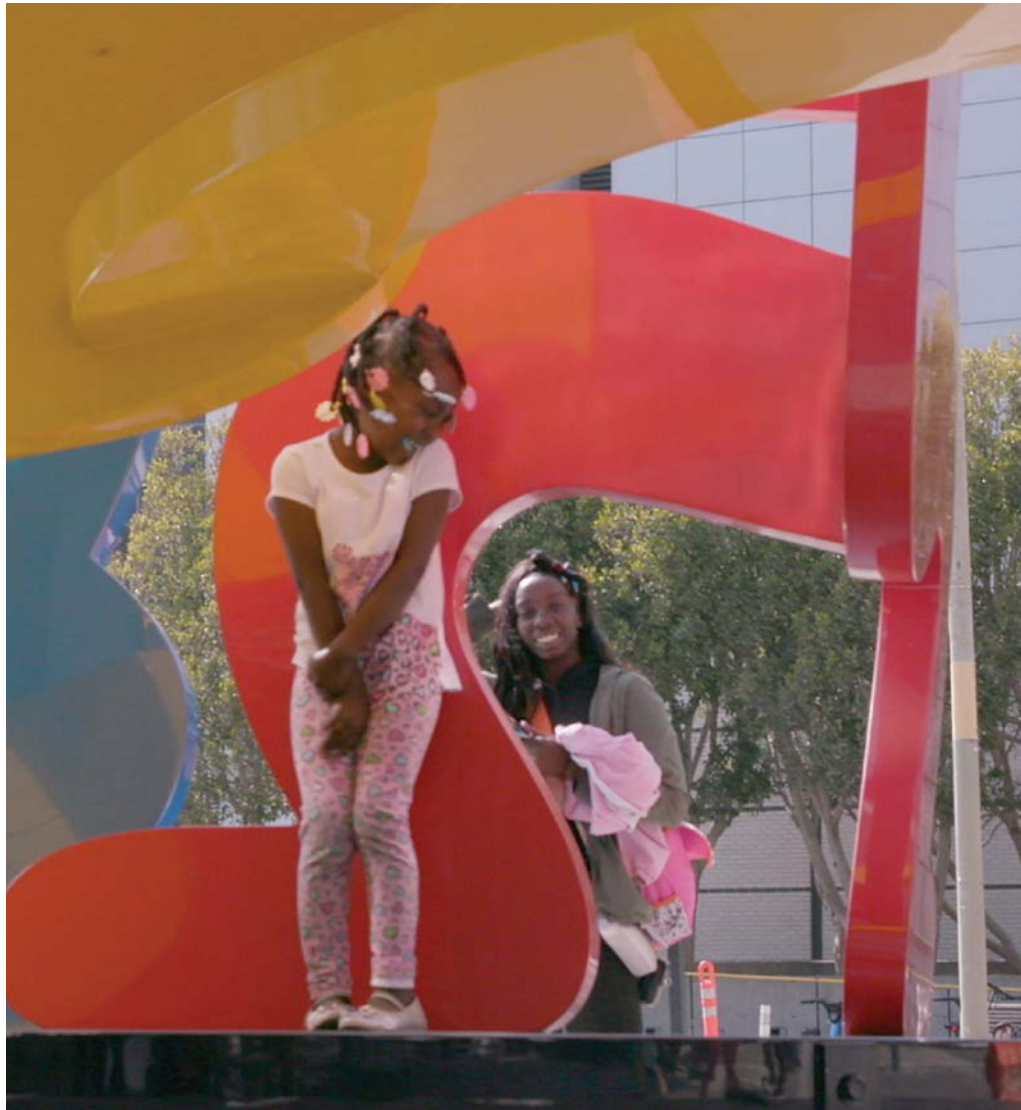
Experience difficulty making decisions

Exhibit behavioral problems

Worry about finding friends and adults she can trust

“I love my voice, because I’m able to advocate and I’m able to teach my daughter how to advocate for herself and be strong.”

– Jazmine



# WHAT DOES SAFETY LOOK LIKE FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN?

## FREEDOM TO DEVELOP HER STRENGTHS AND IDENTITY

Psychological safety begets psychological strength. When girls feel emotionally and physically safe, they develop the capacity for agency, or control over their own lives. A girl who feels safe explores the layers of her identity through her relationships and environment. A girl who feels safe feels confident and comfortable taking risks, asking for help and making mistakes – trusting that these actions will not threaten her sense of self.

## HAVING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS SHE CAN TRUST

Relationships play an integral part in fostering psychological safety. When girls have strong relationships with caring adults and trust the people in their lives, they feel safe. Positive relationships can buffer the impact of stress and are essential to a girl's well-being.

## BEING IN A STABLE, PHYSICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Stability and physical safety are fundamental elements of feeling psychologically safe. A stable environment, free from ongoing chaos and violence, with reliable access to housing, food, healthcare and education establishes a solid platform for healthy development. This stability allows girls to engage in the world around them, empowering them to offer their ideas, participate in learning opportunities, and develop a strong voice.



## JAZMINE: FINDING HER VOICE, STRENGTH AND POWER TO MAKE CHANGE.

“What made me want to get involved for changing stuff for young women and helping them navigate was when I realized how many women were basically coming . . . through the system and I realized they didn’t have family, just like I didn’t have. And I’m like, for so long, I thought I was alone. I thought I was the only person going through this. . . . A lot of women . . . had the same exact experiences that I have had. . . . Once I started realizing that, and once I realized I got a kid and I didn’t want her to be in the same boat I was in, I’m like, ‘Something gotta change.’

“If I was somebody looking at a young black queen growing up, I would be very patient with her, understanding and just to give her the power and the knowledge that she is gonna be going through trials and tribulation. Not making it hard for her, just understanding that she’s going through a lot already.”

– Jazmine

## POLICIES THAT PROMOTE SAFETY.

Policies that provide legal protections can promote psychological safety for girls and young women. Ensuring these policies are implemented in a manner that prioritizes trust, stability, relationships and control, as well as empowering girls and young women to define safety for themselves, is essential to their success.

### WHAT A SUCCESSFUL POLICY LOOKS LIKE:

#### COMMERCIALLY SEXUALLY EXPLOITED CHILDREN (CSEC) PROGRAM, CALIFORNIA

In 2014, California enacted SB 855, which dramatically shifted the way the state approaches youth who are commercially sexually exploited. Instead of criminalizing these youth in the juvenile justice system, the CSEC Program approaches them through a child welfare lens. Launched in 2015, the CSEC Program is administered by the California Department of Social Services and is a statewide partnership among a broad coalition of child-serving agencies.

### HIGHLIGHTS FROM CALIFORNIA'S CSEC PROGRAM:

- Counties participating in the CSEC Program must develop a multidisciplinary, interagency protocol to identify and serve youth
- California Child Welfare Council's CSEC Action Team offers guidance for how to identify and serve youth, generates sample memoranda of understanding, shares promising practices and conducts evaluations
- A survivor Advisory Board consults with individual counties as well as the CSEC Action Team
- Counties are encouraged to collaborate with survivors
- California invests nearly \$20 million annually into the CSEC Program, the largest CSEC investment of any state

# PRACTICES AND PROGRAMS THAT PRIORITIZE SELF-DETERMINATION.

Creating psychologically and physically safe environments requires changing practices. By using trauma-informed approaches that let girls define safety for themselves; encouraging social services and educational agencies to collaborate; and focusing on trust, stability and relationships, we can help nurture self-determination.

## WHAT A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM LOOKS LIKE:

### MY LIFE MY CHOICE, BOSTON, MA

My Life My Choice empowers youth who are survivors of commercial sexual exploitation to find their voice and create a positive life path. Through leadership, mentorship, intensive case management and community-building, the organization “supports survivors in rebuilding their lives, finding their voice, and becoming leaders.” My Life My Choice engages in programming in survivor empowerment, prevention education and solutions, and professional training and advocacy.

## MY LIFE MY CHOICE’S SURVIVOR MENTORING PROGRAM AND EXPLOITATION PREVENTION CURRICULUM HAVE BEEN FOUND TO:

- Increase social support for survivors
- Increase survivors’ ability to cope with stress in a healthy way
- Increase the sharing of CSEC-related help among young people at risk of exploitation
- Decrease involvement in commercial sexual exploitation
- Decrease depression, drug use and justice system involvement
- Decrease dating abuse victimization

For examples of these and other solutions at work see [IAmWhy.org](http://IAmWhy.org)

# I AM WHY. YOUNG WOMEN LEAD THE WAY TO JUSTICE

*I Am Why* brings young women activists together with researchers and other allies to advance a vision of equitable and just systems that provide opportunity and better serve the needs of young women. Those in the field are invited to use *I Am Why* communications tools, which connect young women's strengths and stories to policies, practices and programs that work.

[IAmWhy.org](http://IAmWhy.org).

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