



Room for reimagining masculinity 🙌

Onyango Otieno, Nyumbani

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Transcript:

Bailey (00:00):

Hey there a quick warning before we jump in, I want to let you know that in this episode, we will discuss sexual assault and we advise our listeners to practice discretion in tuning in.

Welcome to get together! It's our show about ordinary people, building extraordinary communities. I'm your host, Bailey Richardson. I'm a partner at people and company and a co author of get together how to build a community with your people and I'm Whitney or good to get together.

Correspondent. In each episode of this podcast, we interview everyday people who have built extraordinary communities about just how they did it. How did they get the first people to show up? How did they grow to hundreds, maybe thousands of more members, Whitney, who did you choose to interview today?



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Whitney (00:55):

Today we are talking to on Django TNO, founder of Numbani, an online safe space for men who have been sexually violated and abused.

Bailey (01:04):

And tell me, you know, Whitney, what, what stood out to you? What did you learn from our conversation today with on Django?

Whitney (01:12):

Usually communities have guidelines and structures set in place when new members interested in joining what I found interesting as an young, as approach of letting in the first members of the structure and process and having them decide how they like to run the community. I think it's important to hear and listen to your members, especially if you're looking to run a sensitive community, such as new Bonnie creates a very collective foundation for the community from the beginning. The other thing was the importance of checking and taking care of yourself as a community leader. This ensures that you're not projecting anything that's unwanted back to the community only by doing so, can we better serve our communities? Lastly, the importance of building with the people own the party, till their own stories. They lead their path to their own healing of importance for that, providing them with the drum for re-imagination and the tools and platform to heal on their



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own terms. A powerful reminder, why we need to continue creating meaningful stories.

Bailey (02:02):

I love to hear on Django story Whitney. So thank you for bringing him to the podcast. And I think while he speaks a lot about the experience of being a man in Africa, it felt so universal what he's working on. So I'm excited to share this story with the listeners. You ready? Should we jump in?

Whitney (02:17):

All right, let's go. Thank you so much for agreeing to be on the podcast. We're super excited to have you on here. So you're the founder and the, and the co-leader of [inaudible] an online safe space for men who've been sexually abused. Could you please tell us more about them by any, you know, the online community you run in Weipa is important for you to create it?

Onyango (02:38):

Well, it's interesting that actually the name, the name is Swahili for home and I came up with it while the space already existed because I didn't know what would I call this kind of space? I mean, I'm bringing men here together. It's the first time they've been meeting and stuff, but the motivation around it was especially around like the onset of COVID 19 around March, April over there. We witnessed heightened sexual abuse cases. And the ministry of health in Kenya was reporting that between mid-March in about June, we had 5,000 rape cases and 70% of the victims or survivors



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were girls who are 18 years of age and going down. And then 5% of the number who are men. You know, we have quite a bit of mechanisms in existence that tries to cater for that issue, but there's barely anything for men, you know?

Onyango (03:42):

So out of personal a personal ordeal that happens to me and I was 20 years old. Our housekeeper raped me. And at the time I didn't even know it was a violation because I mean, my understanding of rape was somebody has to physically and valiantly pin you down somewhere and, you know, violate you. But with time I came to realize that even manipulation, even coercion, even there's so many other ways you know, that rape could happen and we, we do not know about them. So from the simple fact that there are so many cases that work that I came across during this time of COVID that, you know, men were being sodomized and they were being sexually abused sometimes by older women around them, or even sometimes their partners. I felt it was time to sort of just begin a conversation around African masculinity, which I was already doing with a podcast. But this, this time I just wanted to open that space a little bit more first by sharing my stories and helping many other boys and men come out, you know? And that was just life-changing for most people.

Whitney (04:59):

Could you tell me a bit more about why you believe that there were no resources for men? Why didn't they exist?

Onyango (05:07):



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Well, first it's, it begins the the social conditioning around who am I supposed to be. And the fact that men are generally expected to hold in a lot of pain. And so by that fact they barely report when they get abused, the Valley report, when you know that they're going through pain or, you know, their bodies have been validated and all of that. And I think from that alone, there are barely any existing structures that help violence issues. Even in the work around social justice that I've been doing. You find that when you talk to men around abuse, they find it difficult even to talk about it with fellow men. And most times it also to the high suicide rates we've been witnessing and they think of it on a global scale. But kids it's a little more intense.

Onyango (06:05):

I got a story. One time from somebody who reached out to me and he told me that he had been sorta misled by his fellow friends, like friends, he knew, and they also robbed him on that day. And he got so angry and mad that he hired people to go and kill them because he, first of all, he didn't even know that he could report to anybody. He didn't know where to go about that. He didn't think the police would believe him. And he also feared the ridicule. So for him getting the revenge was his way of saying these people will never do it to someone else. And, you know, and I'm like, I'm the first person he ever saw talk about male rape. So a lot of these issues are very socio-cultural. And from that simple fact, and the fact that also the way our governments are set up and the people who are policy makers there, it's very



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patriarchal. And from that simple truth there these guys know very little about sexual reproductive health and rights. They know very literally about, you know, male abuse, because for most parts, the word rape, when we talk about it, we only think of it as going one way that it's a man doing it to a woman.

Bailey (07:20):

And how come you overcame all of those social pressures? Curious, how did you have the courage to do that? Or I had been, I'm a storyteller.

Onyango (07:29):

I had been writing my stories of my life ever since I was I think this is 21, 22, and I got on social media and social media was just becoming a bit more popular in Kenya. And I was in campus then. And by that time I couldn't go on with school because my parents couldn't afford my fees. So I used to go to school just to sit on the computer lab. And I taught myself how to blog. I taught my, I joined Twitter. I joined Facebook and all the social media pages. And so I started writing my experiences because I had so much to say, because I grew up in a home that really stifled my voice and that, that silence was just too defending for me. So for me, finding online spaces where I could express myself was some kind of liberation and you know, ever since that time, I think I got opportunities to keep teaching myself around storytelling and online engagement over all these years.

Onyango (08:26):



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And it helped me understand, say the psychology of online users, you know, because social media is a lot, if you're not used to it, if you don't know how it works and all these techniques it kind of around you, you know, so for me, I think it's been more than, I think 10 years now of doing online writing and social media and storytelling as well, both online and offline. So I understand all these dynamics and also just because I'm a stubborn being, I really, I believe in the power of like courage and people coming out to their stories because everybody's stories, everybody's story is really valid. And the fact that people will feel, they cannot speak up about their own pain is my motivator, because that's what I want to happen. And that's my way of bringing change. In the little space that I have influencing in.

Whitney (09:19):

You mentioned you have 25 members within the community. How did you get your, you know, your first members together? How did you bring them in?

Onyango (09:28):

So I'll give a little background to that now earlier in 2019, is it 2019 years? I, I just woke up one day and because I've been doing mental health advocacy for quite awhile I put up a post on my social media pages that I'm being a, I'm beginning, a mental health support group. That's going to be online particularly on our WhatsApp group. And 200 people get back to me saying, you know, please we'd like to join. So I, I put up two pages, like two



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groups that was like, you know, a hundred, a hundred people each. And you know, just developed some basic community guidelines, but for most parts, I wanted these people to own the space and, and run it the way they wanted it. They wanted it to run. And so I think that gave me a bit of an idea of how I would draw one to run a support group.

Onyango (10:27):

But also beyond that, because I had been doing community events for quite awhile ever since 2013 I've been managing people and managing as, as a safe space was something that was not entirely new to me. So when I particularly wanted to begin a safe space for men I did the same thing. I got online and I made the call out and so people want started reaching out. And so that has also been like very, like, there's so many things I've been learning, especially around how men approach you and they need to talk to you especially about something like that, because first of all, it's mostly a very new area to them and they take a bit of time to even trust, you know and because they, they, they live with the shame they live with the fear. The stigma is also really big in your everyday life. So I mean, one by one, they just kept coming. They kept coming and you know, we just developed this space.

Whitney (11:36):

And what shared activities do you partake with the members just to, you know, bring them together and give them a sense of belonging and togetherness? Yes.



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Onyango (11:47):

So one thing is we have there's healing circles that we use stories. So each person has usually their own day in the beginning first to just share you know, what happens to them for most of these people. It was their first ever time to ever, ever say their story. And so they finally got a space to actually share that, you know and I mean, for that, it's like it's the first step to somebody even, you know getting free because for most of them, it's, it's like an internal wound, which they've never really even managed or even known how to deal with it. And the other thing I have this tools, which I helped them that help with regulating their emotions especially because most of them also are dealing with a lot of post-traumatic stress and anxiety disorders and depression also self-esteem issues and all that.

Onyango (12:53):

So we all, I also divide them into like peer groups where I give them things like assignments. They go and do together. They come back, they report, and this is what I learned this time. This is what I learned at that time. But the idea as I move forward is I want to create a physical wellness centers where now we could have physical places where we could actually sit and talk and probably even have them in our space, just somewhere out, far from town where we could, I could be with them for like a week or two weeks. And you know, we keep developing this program. So it's still very much working progress. But I said, I have to start because I can't, I can't wait until it gets so much money to create a physical space because that's going to take forever



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Whitney (13:40):

And just diving into the operational basics. You know, building community is hard and it must be especially hard if there's a lot of stigmatization and fear, very much pollution. You know, that's been directed towards the members. Is there anything you would recommend to fellow community builders who are gathering people, you know, around our topic that the rest of society may stigmatized?

Onyango (14:01):

I think understanding the sensitivity of what you're dealing with is the first thing. You really have to understand the nature of your community because communities are very, very unique. They are very diverse. You also have to have done your inner work. That's another very important point, just so that you could also avoid projecting any any issues that might affect the community in a way or another, because everybody's coming there, there was, they're guarded up, you know, they're in pain, they're, they're looking for healing, they're looking for all these things. So you, you need to really have checked your emotions. As for me, I go to therapy a lot, you know, cause I mean, all these stories that I deal with almost every day, even outside this space, because so many people reach out to me for so many things. I always need to check in with my emotions to know how am I doing?

Onyango (15:00):



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Where are my, what do I need to change? And things like that. Just to, to take care of myself, which is something very important to me. But if, if you're anywhere and you're trying to build up a community, knowing the nature of the community, knowing yourself is very important. But mostly to create safety in all manner of ways possible. And I think that's one of the shortcomings most of us have because of lack of capacity building. We still do not know what safety looks like in a safe space. Because most of us actually have never even had one, you know, so it's takes a lot of work. It takes a lot of collaboration. It takes a lot of understanding and a lot of emotional intelligence as well.

Whitney (15:47):

I really liked the point on, you know, also just taking care of yourself. I think sometimes we get too caught up in trying to of the members of our community that we forget to take care of ourselves, that we can better serve the community as well. So I like, I like that. What have you learned about community building? In general, you know, just from running Numbani

Onyango (16:10):

That people are, people are really powerful when they are given a chance to be themselves. People are really powerful. Like you might find anybody like somebody you might see for the first time and you might think they don't have much to offer, but the moment they are given safety and they're given space to exist in their full light, they would amaze you. And it just gives me an imagination of what kind of a



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country we can create. If we keep dealing with a lot of the internal traumas, we may have some, some of these traumas are communal. Some of them are tribal. Some of them are national. Some of them are continental, they are on very different layers. So I just keep imagining, like if more people get access to healing, if they get access to regulation of their bodies and emotions, like how much more can we do with Africa, you know? And if they see it in small dates in the, I mean with the few people I work with, it gives me so much hope that they will come doing mixed, some kind of sense, and that people can be able to be productive with their own lives if they are given a chance to reimagine themselves being better.

Whitney (17:18):

You also mentioned you host the podcast from us billing the podcast. Could you share a little bit more about that project and how the podcast serves a nonbinary as a community?

Onyango (17:29):

Okay. So a little background about that. Last year I was working with an organization called green string network. We were doing trauma healing circles for some community members, which communities, which had been exposed to a lot of violence. And we're partnering with Kenya police for this trauma healing circle. So we will, we will go to the colleges like DCI or GSU or key ganja with the national police colleges at and would have like this healing circles, especially in the beginning with their facilitators, just to



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have an understanding of who they are and the things they go through, the nature of their work, the syllabus, the, the, they have to go through and stuff like that. And again, working with the police the, the, the service has probably three quarters of the officers are men. And so a lot of these stories will come out and you'd imagine so many of them still struggle with even how to express themselves.

Onyango (18:36):

They struggled with understanding how that system works, because I mean, they're, they're working and they're exposed to so much dehumanizing working environments. And it just creates a very vicious cycle of violence because a lot of, a lot of how they operate also proliferates a lot of these extra judicial killings. We are seeing a lot of the drapery, a lot of the corruption, and it's still connected to the grand corruption that is in government. And so it's a, it's a very, there's so many complex issues. So in hindsight, I kept wondering, I've always been curious about the African man, because I mean, my dad being violent in the way he was when I was young. And coming from a polygamous home himself, I had so many uncles. I mean, my grandpa had like 30 kids and I mean, it was such a, he doesn't let go city in a village.

Onyango (19:36):

So we were so many people. And I mean, we were so many people, like sometimes I don't even know some of my cousin's names. Like we are so many. And I mean, growing in that kind of an environment, I witnessed so many things about how men



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behaved and about how women are treated. And I always always questioned, and there was nobody to tell me this issues. So when kind of going COVID was beginning I suffered a bit of an anxiety around early April over there. And I was like, no, we couldn't do the college workshops anymore because there was no more traveling. So I sort of just resigned from the work and I said, I want to build up something different from this trauma healing work, but on a different trajectory. And so, because there's barely, I mean, I've been working with a lot of in partnering with a lot of feminist organizations for different activities.

Onyango (20:31):

And I've always really just been almost jealous of how women organize, you know, the way they come together. They teach each other things. They, you know, they want to dismantle the patriarchy. They they're working together in groups, but as guys have nothing, that's guys really have nothing. And I'm like, we continue being the problem because there's nothing happening around how we could understand ourselves as men. We go through so much violence from childhood and we do not know how this upbringings and social conditionings translate in our adult lives, you know? And so I was really curious about that. And so I wanted to start a podcast to actually delve into those issues internally and very, very explicitly just so that the people around me, the men around who would have like a curiosity to want to be better to, to, to, to be healthier as human beings would have an idea of the things they could do. But also because we have very little understanding of who the African man is, you know,



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because for most parts, the African man exists almost just as a tool of labor. And that's one thing I also wanted to demystify. Where does that come from? What is it connected to? What is the historical underpinning of that? And how has it led us to where we are today, even as to contribute to a lot of the agenda based values we witness,

Bailey (22:01):

I'm getting so excited, listening to you, such awesome work you're doing. And I don't know as much about the African man specifically, obviously having never lived there, but it feels like work that should be happening everywhere. And I, I just, I remember someone was describing, you know, that feminism was in some ways the way that women come together to talk about the future that they want, you know, and you need to talk about your current world to understand also what, what might change and what could be better. But I realized when I read that, that I, that, you know, the argument was sort of that men don't really have an equivalent and they, they aren't able to have sort of a container for discussing how men might evolve. And I think this work is, is so important everywhere. So just, just saying as a comment, really, I so glad you're doing it.

Onyango (23:02):

Yeah. Actually one of the learnings I got was, you know, because understandably women are way, much more repressed globally. We do have more initiatives that, you know, try to get the girls and women to some kind of equilibrium with society. But equally like just so many, especially black men



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who are down there and they're beaten up by how this system operates, how Patrik itself operates. And while women are actually doing nearly everything to topple, the patriarchy men also need to get in on the work, but they can't understand how that Patrik itself oppresses them because they have this a you know, the way patriarchy is set up, it's, it's sort of gives an illusion to the man that it's benefiting them, but on the larger picture, it's actually still oppressing them. And that one of the hardest challenges I've had is, I mean, we barely have any donor organizations in this kind of space, we have way much more in the feminist space, but there's not much funding coming to male programs because first of all, they are far in between. Like they're barely even existing. And even in Africa, it's even just, it's like, you can't even talk about it, you know?

Whitney (24:28):

Yeah. But it's all interacting. And I think you do such a good job of explaining that, that if we ignore half of the population in the conversation about, about gender and how we see ourselves, these dynamics are going to continue to play out. And just to build on that point on you know, one of the biggest challenges has been funding. So what other challenge have you experienced from the time started running a number? I need to know what are the challenge has to do? What highlighting,

Onyango (25:00):



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Oh, you know, the way, okay. I've worked with him in his organizations for quite a while, and I love the networks they have that networking is such a huge component of development. It's a huge component of progress. But because very few people have an understanding of African masculinity. You barely have enough people even to reach out to when it comes to the need for collaboration. For example, even when I'm reaching out to people like collaborations for psychotherapy, for example who needs to like understand this survivors they're very far in between including male therapists. They're very, very, like very, very few people get that. So, I mean, you end, the problem is huge. So that's like one of the other major challenges I'm having networking for me is really important. And I'm trying to reach out even to like on a continental scale, like other like healthy masculinity advocates in the continent who are trying to do this work. And, you know, I think just connecting with them is, is another thing that, you know, I think could help us even develop a future of like imagine what kind of a future the African male has, but yeah. On the networking issue, that's, that's a big thing because very few people understand this work,

Whitney (26:24):

Looking into the future. What's, what's the big dream for your money? Where do you see in your money perhaps the next five, five years, five to 10 years?

Onyango (26:34):



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Well, I'm seeing collaborations with government to create physical wellness centers. I want to have as many events possible across the country talking to men about their lives. So, so far because I've been doing like a crowdfunding thing campaign I've been able to, I wanted to also create like a visual episode because visual is also really important. And on it, I am talking to adolescent boys to middle aged boys, to older men on their stories and their lives. Because for me, that documentation is very important, especially for the men who will come after us, who may not even still have those structures, but at least they will have the stories. At least it will give them some kind of direction and stuff. But I'd love even to hold conferences around masculinity, you know and, and conferences that are in Africa, around African masculinity. I'd love us to like sort of reimagine who we wants to become, just so that we don't, we don't, we don't just keep repeating what our, our fathers and forefathers I've been doing. So I have no idea how that's going to happen, but my spirit feels very strongly about it, that these things shall come to pass.

Whitney (27:57):

I hope all that comes to pass. And you know, what advice can you give to aspiring community leads, you know, who are looking to bring people together, especially, but just as we talked about earlier around, you know, topics that may be difficult, you know, to have in the public eye, because, you know, we have to applaud you for the work you're doing. Cause it's, it's, it's not easy. It's a combustion is that people tend to share it from, and you know, we'll rather



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have in very closed settings, but what advice would you give to someone out there who's looking to start a similar community?

Onyango (28:31):

The first thing is to understand yourself, you have to really know yourself. You really have to know who you are, because you have to be very, very grounded. You have to be extremely grounded, like being grounded and centered is the first priority for this work. The second thing is read as much as you can, about what you want to do, talk to as many people as possible and network talk to as many people as possible about what you want to do. Because that gives you a bigger frame of mind to know what you're really getting into. Some people work with, you know, the emotion of this, this, this is a brilliant idea. They, you just jump on to eat and then in between it, you realize you didn't even have the proper tools to do the work. And so I think my background in working with communities over the years six, seven, eight, nine years now has given me a very good background to know what I want to do with a space and how I can manage it and how I can manage myself through it.

Onyango (29:36):

And so for example, we know we, I have very few to, to read even about African masculinity. It's barely there. And a lot of the academic papers, we have also very extremely expensive. So I have to often like use my own money to get access to these, these materials so that I can even just read them and translate them into a podcast with my own



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content. It's a lot of work. So for me, I'm just like letting people know that in as much as it could be difficult when you have the will, then the way, the way presented itself, you know, so self knowledge self-actualization understand the space that you want to create and work with people because you can never really do these things alone. Not at all, especially because it's not about you, but it's, it's about this space you want to create in this space. This space actually virtually means the people on the power to their own stories. They lead the path to their own healing. We are only supporting, you know, we are only helping with tools. We are only supporting with ideas. We are only creating a room for, for the re imagination, you know? So again, you know, to remove yourself from the center to actually to just decenter yourself from, you know, the highlight of what's happening inside there is very important. Yeah.

Whitney (31:06):

Oh, I love that. I think one of the mantras that people and company is building with people as opposed to, you know, building force. So it's, it's, it's good to hear that you're working together with your community just to create this safe space for them. The room for reimagination, that's such a great phrase. I love that. It's beautiful. So I know you're a mental health advocate as well. And so in what ways have you, in all these community initiatives that you've been running in community activity that you've involved yourself in in what ways has that also reflected in your



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work around mental health and maybe perhaps even just speak a little bit more about on that?

Onyango (31:46):

One of the things I'm really proud of is this advocacy has led to the amendment bill or the mental health amendment bill. That's currently in parliament right now. And we've been lobbying for government to just create better policies that will eventually bring more public funds to mental health care in this country. On, on the larger scale, I'm imagining this thing happening for Africa where, you know, I was in Canada in 2019 and I was so jazzed by the organization around mental health care there, even though yes, they were, they were not like various efficient, but, you know, like there was a very good, almost national understanding of what mental health is and people talk about it and all that. But here again, language barrier is a thing because not everybody speaks English, not everybody will understand what depression is or risks Afonia or anything else, mentor, you know, because of these phrases we use.

Onyango (32:51):

And so what I'm excited about or have been excited about the mental health advocacy, it also gives us power to language because we can create these stories from, from our own reality and come up with our own languages about what we are going through. But I love the fact that I've gained so much friendship, you know, and and love I've met amazing people. Some of whom were written off by their own families written of based society, that they wouldn't do much, you know, with



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their lives. And because I really relate with that. It's it's almost always a story of triumph because I've been part of trying to support people in building their own resilience. And I think just with more advocacy and more lobbying, I mean, the future really looks bright. How can, as you know, interested in being part of, you know, your money reach out how can they be part of the community?

Onyango (33:56):

So I think reaching out to me online would just be okay. I am just found on Facebook as on Django general. My Instagram page reads Rick's poets are also exploited on Twitter. Currently not very active on Twitter because my account was restricted because I treat too much about trauma. So right now Facebook and Instagram or even email is possible. So that goes like on Django home@gmo.com. That's [inaudible] gmail.com. I'm pretty much often almost always online, so it's easy to reach out to me and we could always collect.

Speaker 4 (34:37):

All right, thanks. [inaudible] Thank you for the work that you're doing. And I wish we, we did not live so far away from each other, so someday I can meet you, but thank you for the work that you're doing and maybe someday we'll cross fads.

Onyango (34:49):

And I appreciate it. [inaudible]

Speaker 4 (34:52):



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Speaker 5 (35:58):

[Inaudible].