

10

Rehearsing for reality: using role-play to transform attitudes and behaviour

Rose Mbowa

· Introduction

This article is based on an interview with Professor Rose Mbowa, Director of the Department of Music, Dance and Drama, Makerere University, Kampala.

Background

Professor Rose Mbowa has many years of experience of the power of drama and role-play in community development. Its capacity to enable people to challenge their present situation in a safe, practice setting and to think of ways to change their behaviour is clear. But it is hard to find a more pressing challenge than attitudes towards, and behaviour around, sex. Over the last four years Rose Mbowa has been involved in the development of a training package called *Stepping Stones*, which aims to enable people to do just this.

What is Stepping Stones?

Stepping Stones is a training package on HIV/AIDS, gender issues, communication and relationship skills. Launched in December 1995, it is designed both for use in existing HIV/AIDS projects and in general development projects which plan to introduce an on-going AIDS component. It grew out of a need to address the vulnerability of women and young people in decision-making about sexual behaviour.

The package is designed to enable women and men of all ages to explore their social, sexual and psychological needs, to analyse the

communication blocks they face and to practise different ways of addressing their relationships. The workshop aims to enable individuals, their peers and their communities to change their behaviour - individually and together - through the 'stepping stones' discussion and role-play exercises which the various sessions provide.

All sessions use a participatory approach of adult learning through shared discussions. All exercises are based on people's own experiences. Role play and drawing exercises enable everyone to take part. No literacy is needed. Participants discuss their experiences, act them out, analyse them, consider alternative outcomes and then rehearse these together in a safe, supportive group. People feel safe because most sessions take place in groups of their own gender and age, with a facilitator of the same gender and, ideally, a similar age.

Experiences with Stepping Stones

In this interview, Rose Mbowa speaks of her experience of a recent training course in Entebbe and describes some of the issues that arose as part of the fieldwork.

Q: How many groups did you have [who were being trained]?

RM: We had five groups. There were three women's groups; one for the youngest ladies, who objected to being called little girls or babies and were between 10 and 13. The next female group was for kids about 14-16. Then there was the older women's group and of course, their ages varied. Some were teachers in their 30s. There were also two young girls

in that group, who found they could not fit in with the 14-16s because they were two working girls, working with their mothers in the shops. And then we had also the young men's group which was about 13-17 years old. And the old men's group which was not really old because they were in their thirties.

I think everything was arranged by the political mobiliser, the Resistance Committee mobilising lady. I think she mobilised her fellow women, a group of women she is close to. We found that the medium girls and the youngest all came from the same voluntary school which is run by these women.

Young women's dilemmas

Q: Could you tell us a bit about the background of some of these girls, the young women in the older group?

RM: The majority among the 10-13 and the 14-16 year olds are orphans, staying with maybe their auntie or their sisters, some with friends. That's why they have this voluntary school at the Entebbe centre which is run by these women. There's a town council that is trying to support these women. I think they give them only 10,000 shillings a month, to give these girls some education. To many of them, these teachers are the only people that they can go to who can give them some kind of guidance in life. One of the problems that came out, both with the little ones and the middle girls is that they did not have anybody to communicate with. They never had, they have not been at all counselled in life, on how to get on, especially in the midst of this HIV/AIDS problem and many other problems.

There is one girl, for example, who said when she had her period for the first time she was so scared, she did not know what it was all about. She had never had anybody to talk to. When she saw blood, it was quite a scare. So this workshop was a big opportunity for them; to have people whom they were relating to all the time and being able to examine their concerns, to talk about themselves, to share their needs, their problems.

Q: And do these young girls already have boyfriends, or are they already involved in sexual relations?

RM: Those of the 14-16 year olds seem to have all been sexually abused, not that they have boyfriends, but they have all been abused.

Q: By whom?

RM: By men in society, in their community. Because for most of them, for all of them, they have to do something to ... add to their living. When they go home at the end of the school, they are given maybe some cooked food or some raw food to take to the markets and sometimes it's late by the time they return. Even if it's not late, somehow, somewhere men get out to attack them on the way.

At the time we were in Entebbe a little child had been sent to a shop in one of the little trading centres where some of these people came from. A man jumped on her as she was going to the shops. Fortunately the girl gave an alarm and she was rescued by another man who had taken out his goods early. This man, at the time of our 'final community meeting' (part of the Stepping Stones workshop), was being taken to the police station. So this was just one example of the things they had been talking about, which was happening to all of them.

Now, this little girl was going to the shop once. But most of these girls have to go to the markets every day, to take food from their homes to go and sell, so they can have some money to help them towards their books and so on, towards their needs. When they made their 'community request' (part of the Stepping Stones workshop), these middle girls requested their parents, their guardians to give them enough to meet their needs.

Using drama to communicate needs

Q: How did they make this request to the community?

RM: Through drama. It was a drama in which these girls showed themselves meeting with the sugar daddies who were giving them

money. The sugar daddies found them easy prey ... They fell in with the sugar daddies because they could meet their needs, then they got into problems. At 'the final community meeting' (part of the Stepping Stones workshop, where each group of participants presents its special request back to the rest of their own community), there were some women and men in the audience who had not been involved in the workshop, but who were invited to this meeting to see what everyone had been doing. So they discussed all this problem there and then.

Now one of the girls who was present had been in the workshop to start with, but eventually she started not coming regularly. She had always been saying: 'even if they give us that, will that be enough?'. She was saying that even if the parents or the guardians were able to give you something, she thought that they did not have enough money to be able to meet every need that they wanted. So, I think her own solution was for them to work, to be able to work themselves.

But now in the working, they were meeting with problems too. The little ones' drama also showed the problems of working. In their drama, they showed how the children were at the house with their mother, but one of the children did not belong to this lady so she was always made to work and work and was not given enough food, so she was easy prey for the man who turned up She was just isolated, so exposed to the danger. So the request from the little ones is to be loved, and at the same time not to be exposed to any sex, because they and their bodies were not ready yet for sex.

Negotiating change through drama

So the mayor and his officials committed themselves to strengthening the probation office in town, where the problems of the children could be addressed. This office over the years, did not have staff, and was not well run. So at this 'final community meeting' he committed himself to strengthening it, to putting in the manpower that was required, because there were all these problems in the community of girls being sexually abused and the children themselves not having their

immediate needs met. In this way, there would be a place where they could go to with their problems.

Q: And were the mayor and the town clerk and other people already aware of these problems for the young women in the community?

RM: The other people were aware. You know, this official person just turns up to make a statement, so we don't know what he already knew or didn't. But what amazed him was that all the children, even these young children, were able to identify their own problems and articulate them and generate them at this level. The forum that was used, this 'final community meeting' was good in that it enabled little ones, these 10-13 year olds, to take full part. It actually amazed him, that what they were talking about was the reality: everything he saw was the truth.

The young boys, their request was that the girls should not put on mini-skirts, because when they put on mini-skirts, they excited them and got them to start desiring to have sex with them. So that was discussed and of course the girls were encouraged not to put on mini-skirts to wear everywhere, but of course to see occasions maybe when it was appropriate for them and to know the risks they were taking.

Q: But then isn't that rather like the boys saying 'it's the girls' fault, it's not our problem'?

RM: What the boys are saying is that any boy seeing a beautiful girl would be excited, would be attracted to that girl, but the mini-skirt exposes so much of them that they find that they want to see more of the girls! That was their request. But then the community said of course, that there is freedom, freedom of what people can do: but that the young girls should know, they should not jump on any fashion that comes, they should know the risks they are taking in putting on things like that. Especially knowing what they had shown in their dramas, even the little girls, with the problems they were having being sexually abused in the community. If girls met these people who were already off their heads and they find them in a mini-skirt, they would just jump onto them.

Women's requests

The women's request (at 'the final community meeting') was that their husbands come back early and be faithful, not go running off with other women. In their drama they showed a woman who was neglected at home, she was always there, working a lot and of course as they work, they start getting old. So the man goes and brings some other woman home, with whom he goes off into the room. So what she does is says she should also get another one. So she goes and gets a man and they stay in the sitting room while the husband is in the bedroom. When the husband comes out and finds her with this man, in fact they are not even started getting together, he is so furious, there is fighting and so on. So that whole issue was discussed also.

Older men's perspectives

Q: What was the older men's request?

RM: The older men's request was for the women to be faithful. This is an urban situation, and one of the problems we found out about early on in Entebbe was that the man would come back and go to the beer place and drink. The woman, of course, being neglected at home would walk out and go to another place to drink and the children would be left alone. One of the women's dramas showed that one of the boys became a drug addict, the girl got pregnant and the parents had to resolve all the problems by getting back together.

Reflections on Stepping Stones

Q: So, what's your overall impression of Stepping Stones?

RM: 'Of Stepping Stones? Powerful. It's a powerful tool... Basic work which inspires communities to look at their needs and really get together and discuss their problems. It's very, very empowering to the community. It has helped, it has changed the community in Masaka, (where we ran the very first workshop) and I think even in Entebbe it has. For example, one married girl who came to the workshop said 'I'm going to try this'. She listened from her fellow women about some possible solutions to the problems she had

with her husband in bed and so on. She tried it, it helped her. Then she went and tried the condom. When she asked the husband, the husband said 'eh? Where did you get this?', she said 'in Stepping Stones' and the man said 'I learnt about it a long time ago, but I was afraid to tell you because I knew you would say maybe I'd been sleeping around. That's why I have never bought the condom'. So they went straight to their neighbour who had them, they gave them some condoms, they tried them and now they're using them.

So it's kind of transforming attitudes and so on. It's very good ... And it can work in any community, because it makes people address their own individual reality so it's not limited to any particular context. I think one can enter into any community, be it children, be it women, be it prisoners, be it I don't know what, and it will help them. Even if it's European, Indian, African, I don't know what. I'm enjoying it because it's also helping me enormously. One thing I learnt, I've never listened to people. It made me realise I'm a bad listener, it has tended to help me check on that. And as a facilitator, it is important that my listening becomes very, very powerful. It helped me enormously to improve relationships between me and my son. We listen to each other a lot now.'

• Changing vision, changing behaviour

This interview with Rose Mbowwa was conducted shortly after the training workshop in Entebbe had taken place. But as we all know, people can be fired up with good intentions of change during a workshop, only for great plans to flounder subsequently.

Early feedback from people in Entebbe who attended the Stepping Stones workshop is encouraging in that their comments are largely focused on a shift in vision - a personal and group-wide awareness of possible ways of behaving which are different from what they have themselves done previously. Because old and young, male and female have all been equally involved in the workshop, there has not been a sense of the women ganging up on the men, or of the needs of the young superseding the needs of the old. Instead, there

has been a community-wide development of awareness of and respect for the needs of others in their community.

Shifts in attitude have indeed been translated into action, such as the couple who can now use condoms, the men who have decided to stay with one partner, the young girls who are now able to develop relationships with boys based on friendship, rather than sex. The fact that such issues, based on the needs of more vulnerable members of the community, and not just those of the leaders, can even be aired and discussed in public is pretty astounding. And the very process of publicly acknowledging and accepting them reinforces the possibility of the behaviour change taking place amongst these people themselves and others in this community.

Change doesn't happen overnight. Such a workshop should only be seen as a small beginning in a long-term process. But it is important for us as development workers to work with the community members, in order to enable them to translate their hopes into actions. Rehearsing for reality is a great way to begin. Sustaining that reality is the next challenge.

- **Rose Mbowa**, Director of the Department of Music, Dance and Drama, Makerere University, Kampala.

NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The training workshop in Entebbe was conducted by Professor Rose Mbowa with Baron Oron. The workshop was funded by Redd Barna Uganda and organised by ACTIONAID Uganda. With many thanks also to the members of the community in Entebbe who took part in the workshop and follow-up meeting; and to Lauren Oliver who transcribed the interview with Rose Mbowa and conducted a preliminary edit of its contents.

The interview was conducted by Alice Welbourn.

Stepping Stones is available from TALC, PO Box 49, St. Albans, Herts., AL1 5TX, UK. Telephone: (+44) 1727 846852. Fax: (+44) 1727 853869.