

## Stepping Stones, Rethinking our lives.

### Perspectives from Latin America

#### Testimony of Soledad Guayasamin, Regional Sexuality and HIV Advisor, Plan Region of the Americas

The Stepping Stones methodology permits:

#### **1. A reflection on the gender inequities that shape how we, men and women, live and experience our sexuality:**

*I was always scared and ashamed to talk about these things with my husband. He didn't want me to attend these meetings; he used to say that we discussed silly things and that after these meetings, women would rebel against their husbands...they would become bad women.... It has been different... I used to live in the darkness...now I am in the light"*

A woman from an indigenous community participating in the workshop – Ecuador

In general in the region of the Americas, sexuality is an aspect of life influenced by cultural and social patterns, and marked by silence, shame, blame and prohibition. These characteristics are conditioned by aspects such as ethnicity, a person's social or economic conditions and, to a significant extent by gender inequities: what is prohibited and what is permitted for some and not for others serves to generate the great vulnerability of men and women.

#### **2. The breaking of the silence about violence:**

*"I know that I have rights, I also know where I should be demanding these rights, however all that I have learnt is meaningless when every Friday my husband comes home drunk and after hitting me wants me to sleep with him...."*

A young woman participating in the workshop in the Dominican Republic

Breaking the cycle of violence requires above all a personal and individual disposition to stop the violence, a disposition that is often absent in the person who is suffering such violence. To end the violence

we need strengthened self-esteem, to recognize that we are a person with rights. Stepping Stones helps to achieve this change.

### 3. Improved communication between fathers, mothers and their children:

*"I want my parents to take me into account and to respect me in my decisions, I want them to support me in the good times and also in the bad"*  
A young man participating in the workshop in Ecuador

*"My son was very quiet and timid, now after the Stepping Stones workshops he participates much more. I have changed also, now I listen to him."*  
A mother participating in the workshop in Bolivia

In many families, communication between parents and their children is characterized by silence, indifference and fear. Respecting and valuing their thoughts and words, and supporting the actions of their children, are important first steps for improving the communication between fathers, mothers and their children.

### 4. Improvements in our professional practices...becoming more humane.....

*"First, as a woman, I feel more confident of myself. I now have the feeling that I am in charge of my sexuality and my fears have disappeared. Secondly, as a doctor and as a professional I can now see clearly the relationship between gender and health. I understand how gender inequalities in sexuality operate and how these determine the vulnerability of women, particularly to HIV and sexually transmitted infections. I have learnt that HIV positive women are the ultimate expression of gender inequalities in sexuality and health"*

Medical Professional - Ecuador

The traditional “biological” training of doctors has generated barriers in the way they relate with the men and women who seek attendance within the health services. To establish a relationship mediated by emotion and affection is, in general, considered unprofessional. The good doctor is the doctor who “knows how to heal”, who “knows about treatments” – regardless if he or she understands little or nothing of the

context or the social problems. Stepping Stones allows us to understand the importance of an integral holistic approach.

## 5. The generation of competencies for life.....

*"... I learnt to say NO decisively. Before I was scared and often I would end up doing what others wanted me to do. Now I feel sure of myself, calmer, I can say No if something doesn't seem right to me and I can say it without a fight, without feeling bad"*

A young woman -Perú

Changing our behaviors and our practices doesn't only depend on the knowledge and information that we have. It implies recognizing that we live in a context infused with values and customs many of which violate our basic right to live with dignity. Changing behaviors and practices implies the strengthening of individual and collective knowledge, supporting the construction of a context favorable for the exercise of our rights. The Stepping Stones methodology contributes to this process.

## 6. The strengthening of solidarity and support:

Between peers: between female adolescents/youth and women:  
*"because amongst us we feel more confident"*

*"I like coming to the workshops because we meet, share and talk about life... We've never had the opportunity to do this before. The other girls listen and I like to tell them things that I wouldn't dream of talking about in other places.*

*The group gives me strength...."*

A teenage mother –Perú

There are few spaces in which women, teenagers and girls can meet to talk and to share their feelings and thoughts. There are many factors that contribute to this situation, from prohibition by the family or partner to the fact that girls and women themselves limit their active participation in such spaces. Breaking down the fear, gaining confidence in oneself, "empowering the word" are other important results of the methodology.

**Between peers: between male adolescents/youth and male adults**  
**“Amongst the men...we are beginning to lose our fears”**

*“I am learning many new things, but what is happening in our homes is also really good. Now I can talk with my children about things I would never have dared to discuss before.”*

*“The other day my son came to me and hugged me...I said to him “my son, what do you want?”....he replied “nothing papa I just wanted to hug you and tell you that I love you”.... I couldn’t hold back the tears. How hard it is for us to show our emotions. This I have learnt in the workshop.*

*A father from an indigenous community – Ecuador*

The groups of men have also valued the Stepping Stones workshops, especially because they have helped them to talk more openly with their wives and children at home. Expressing your emotions had been socially prohibited; it had been considered a weakness, something “for the women”. This culturally and socially accepted prohibition had constructed a barrier in the relations between men and their children and partners.

**In the community.....“Together we can change our reality”**

*“When the other women learnt that he was beating me they went to speak with the bosses of the estate....I thought that because these bosses were men they wouldn’t do anything...it’s always been that way after all. But now it’s different: the bosses threatened to withdraw his benefits and expel him. They also found a doctor to work with him to not be violent. Together, yes we can make a difference....”*

A young woman participating in the workshop in the Dominican Republic.

Stepping Stones strengthens community solidarity and the respect for individual and collective rights. Learning and re-learning to work amongst all and with all are also the challenges of Stepping Stones.