



Stepping Stones

Preface to Bangla Edition

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I am delighted to learn that the "Stepping Stones" training package has now been translated and adapted for use in Bangladesh. The training package was first developed in Uganda, but it was always intended that it would have a much wider use than in just one community in one country. The original workshop consisted of village members from one community in Uganda, where both Muslim and Christian - and other - community members joined together to engage in the workshop sessions together. Since then, "Stepping Stones" has been widely used in Africa, Asia, Latin America and elsewhere, by many Muslim, Christian, Hindu and other communities, including the Gambia, which is almost entirely a Muslim country.

The reason why I hope and believe that "Stepping Stones" may be of relevance to the lives of people in many different corners of the world is that it seeks to support participants to address and deal with the really big questions facing *all* of us in our lives, no matter who we are or where we come from. These questions include: what is life about? what is death about? what are gender, sex, our belief systems, our values, our relationships with those around us about? Stepping Stones is not intended as a book of rules, but is designed as a way to support individuals, their peers, family members and other community members to explore these issues together in their lives, in a context of mutual support, respect and practical action.

I wrote Stepping Stones because I myself discovered that I am HIV-positive in 1992. So Stepping Stones was a way of trying to make sense of what had happened to me in my life, and trying to create a training package that might have protected me from acquiring HIV. I have been very fortunate over the 17-odd years that I have had HIV. I have been surrounded by friends and family who have gone on loving me, supporting me, giving me the care and, more recently, the medical treatment that I have needed. I have been able to continue to lead a life fully integrated into my community,

and fully involved in all decision-making about what happens to me. This is very far from the reality for most HIV-positive people in the world, who are shunned, ostracised, blamed and excluded from life by their communities, and then die very scared and lonely deaths. Because I have been supported so well, I have been able to speak out about my HIV-positive status, and I hope and trust that this has helped others to understand what HIV is - and what it isn't.

People say that the best HIV prevention education is for people knowingly to meet someone like themselves who is HIV-positive. I believe this to be true. However, only if there is a supportive environment for those of us with HIV will we be able to summon the courage to speak out and share our experiences. So I hope that this training package will enable us all to understand more clearly how important it is for us ALL to question and challenge our ignorance about HIV, as well as our negative attitudes towards people with HIV, so that we can all learn from each other how very easily HIV can - and does - affect us all.

We are all part of one big humanity on this earth. HIV doesn't happen in a vacuum. It is caused *not* by women, or "bad" people, or foreigners or drug users. Blaming sections of society who are already in some way marginalised by those in power is a common reaction around the world. It is also a false analysis, although it may offer us short-term comfort to blame those whom society already scorns. As many societies have now begun to realise, this approach is like blaming the leaves of a dying tree, as they wither and fall off the tree, without asking ourselves or trying to understand *why* the leaves are turning brown and withering in the first place, and without realising that we too are leaves on this same tree and will one day also be affected by its condition. Instead, the root causes of HIV in *all* societies are related to imbalances of power, wherever we live in the world: between rich and poor, between men and women, between old and young, between higher and lower castes or classes, between those who feel loved and cared for as they grow up and those who don't; and between those who wield political power and those who do not. I hope that this training package will help everyone to understand how HIV breeds and flourishes on these root inequities and injustices in our lives, and our collective reluctance to look at or challenge them. I hope it will also enable us together to have the courage to stamp out these injustices and, in doing so, also halt the spread of HIV.