

# **BREAKING BARRIERS AND BUILDING BRIDGES: YUSUFU'S EMPOWERMENT JOURNEY WITH STEPPING STONES**

## **CASE STUDY**

### **Acknowledgements**

This case study was developed with advice from colleagues in the STREAM Network in Tanzania to whom the author express many thanks. Similarly, the author expresses appreciation to the office of Positive Young Women Voice in Nairobi Kenya, which originated the brilliant idea for Global STREAM Network members to write case studies from their local contexts. The author believes that the developed case studies will be informative, transformative and motivational for those who read them, including young people across the Global STREAM Network nations and beyond.

### **HIV and AIDS Overview**

In sub-Saharan Africa in 2022, six in seven new HIV infections among adolescents aged 15–19 years were among girls, while girls and young women aged 15–24 years were twice as likely to be living with HIV than young men. Many barriers, including harmful social norms, imbalance of power in relationships, gender-based violence and inequitable access to education and economic opportunities contribute to their disproportionate share of new HIV infections in the region (UN Women 2023).

### **Stepping Stones Approach**

Stepping Stones, a transformative training program aims to uphold the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) of individuals affected by HIV, challenge harmful social norms, and foster partnerships to combat gender-based violence and promote economic opportunities. Stepping Stones with Children programme works with children aged 5-14 and their caregivers.

### **The results**

Through this programme: In Tanzania 1,825 people were trained on Stepping Stones with Children period 2012-2019; relationship between caregivers and children became more loving; increased treatment adherence in some children and children have formed small groups for mutual support thereby strengthening their resilience to the impact of HIV are among other results.

### **The essence**

In essence, Yusufu's Case Study empowerment journey, mirrored in the broader results of the Stepping Stones program, exemplifies the breaking of barriers and the building of bridges—bridges that unite individuals, nurture relationships, and pave the way for a shared journey toward health, resilience, and holistic well-being.

## **Yusufu Mohammed Msafiri**



Meet Yusufu Mohammed Msafiri, a 23-year-old resident of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He is an inspiring young traveler navigating life with HIV. Despite facing the profound loss of both parents at a young age, Yusufu has shown resilience and determination in pursuing a secondary school education. Currently residing in Dar es Salaam, he has immersed himself in meaningful volunteer work at the PASADA organization, where he serves as a Peer supporter for adolescents and young people living with HIV, aged 10 to 29. PASADA stands for Pastoral Activities and Services for People with AIDS Dar es Salaam Archdiocese.

### ***What challenges did you face growing up with HIV?***

I confronted profound challenges with stigma, starting within my own family. My father, upon learning of my HIV status when I was still a child, rejected me. This rejection extended to relatives, compounding the emotional burden I carried. Further intensifying my struggles, my mother passed away during my infancy, leaving me in the care of my maternal grandmothers.

Beyond the confines of my family, the community exhibited its own form of stigma, viewing me through the lens of my HIV status. Complicating matters, my health deteriorated, manifesting in severe skin rashes that covered my body, including my head. This visible sign of illness became a focal point for discrimination and prejudice from community members.

School, rather than being a refuge, became an additional battleground for stigma. My health issues led to a conspicuous red mark on my uniform, prompting teachers to isolate me from my classmates. This exclusionary treatment extended to academics, with teachers restricting my participation in both play and schoolwork. Consequently, my academic performance suffered, exacerbated by poor attendance due to illness.

Compounding these challenges, my adherence to medication was poor and the prescribed medication were less effective. Despite facing this array of difficulties, I found myself lacking the coping mechanisms to confront and address the multifaceted challenges surrounding me.

This journey reflects the profound impact of stigma on various aspects of my life, from family dynamics to community interactions and educational experiences. It underscores the need for

comprehensive support systems and resources to empower individuals like me to navigate these challenges with resilience and determination.

***At what age did you come across the Stepping Stones Program and how did you first learn about it?***

In 2013 at the age of 14, while still in primary school, I had the privilege of participating in the Stepping Stones with Children training, facilitated by the PASADA organization. This unique training brought together parents or guardians along with their children, fostering a collaborative and holistic approach to personal development.

The primary focus of the training was to empower young individuals, like myself, in recognizing and accepting our situations. The program aimed to build our capacity to face diverse challenges, including navigating through complex emotions and feelings. It provided a safe and supportive environment where both parents and children could engage in open dialogue, promoting a deeper understanding of oneself and one's circumstances.

***What is the most important lesson you learned while on the Stepping Stones with Children training during that period?***

The Stepping Stones with Children training period was transformative, and one of the most significant lessons I learned was a profound self-discovery. As the training progressed, I witnessed a noticeable shift in my self-perception. Notably, I acquired the ability to responsibly manage my medication without constant reminders from my guardian. This newfound sense of responsibility not only marked personal growth but also highlighted the practical skills instilled by the program.

Moreover, the training played a pivotal role in boosting my confidence. I began to recognize and embrace my inherent virtues and unique personality. This newfound self-assurance became a driving force in various aspects of my life, fostering a positive self-image.

Equally noteworthy was the impact on my relationship with my guardian. The training contributed to a significant improvement in our connection. The new learned skills and confidence I gained during the Stepping Stones program enabled me to engage more meaningfully with my guardian. This closer bond not only enriched my personal life but also emphasized the program's holistic approach in nurturing positive interpersonal relationships.

In essence, the Stepping Stones with Children training taught me the importance of selfmanagement, instilled confidence, and deepened my understanding of personal virtues, ultimately fostering a more meaningful connection with those around me.

***What achievements followed after completion of the Stepping Stones Training?***

Following the completion of the Stepping Stones Training, my achievements have been both personal and community-oriented. Academically, I excelled in school, successfully completing my secondary education without major health issues. This accomplishment not only reflects the positive impact of the program on my overall well-being but also underscores its role in fostering a conducive environment for academic success.

Jobwise, my ability to trust myself and effectively engage with others, skills improved during the Stepping Stones Training, played a pivotal role in securing my current role as a peer supporter. Colleagues recognize me as a role model, and in this capacity, I extend support to my peer young people facing similar challenges both in clinical settings and within our community.

One of my significant responsibilities is referring young people to medical services. The ease with which I carry out this task is facilitated by the personal testimonies I share about my journey and how I successfully navigated similar circumstances. This firsthand experience serves as a powerful tool in encouraging and guiding others toward accessing the necessary healthcare services.

In my community, I have assumed a leadership role as the chairman of the network of young people living with HIV in Temeke district, Dar es Salaam. This position has provided a platform to address critical issues such as Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), stigma, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and societal norms that adversely affect young people. Through various youth forums, I advocate for solutions and contribute to the development of strategies to overcome these challenges.

In essence, the Stepping Stones Training has not only empowered me personally but has also positioned me as a positive force for change within my community, allowing me to contribute meaningfully to various aspects of youth well-being and advocacy.

***What does your journey tell us about the transformative power of Programs like Stepping Stones?***

The transformative impact of programs like Stepping Stones is vividly reflected in my personal journey. Stepping Stones has been instrumental in shaping me as a young individual, fostering self-recognition, and equipping me with the skills to assist other young people. Participation in the program has cultivated assertiveness within me, enabling me to confront challenges head-on and devise effective solutions, including engaging in advocacy work.

The influence of the Stepping Stones program extends beyond personal development, permeating various facets of life, from the family sphere to the broader community. Individuals who undergo Stepping Stones training integrate its principles into their daily lives. This integration facilitates a quick adaptability to change, showcasing a remarkable resilience that becomes a hallmark of those who have experienced the program.

Moreover, a Stepping Stones programme participant evolves into an agent of positive change. This transformation empowers individuals to contribute meaningful ideas, playing an active role in ushering in positive transformations aimed at achieving peace, justice, and equality within their communities. In essence, the Stepping Stones program not only shapes individuals but also propels them to become catalysts for broader societal change.

# **JASMIN FARAJ MBAROUK: A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY WITH STEPPING STONES**

## **CASE STUDY**

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### **The results**

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### **The essence**

In essence, Jasmin's Case Study empowerment journey, echoed in the broader results of the Stepping Stones program, illustrates a transformative journey of overcoming stigma, pursuing dreams, and advocating for change.

**Jamila Faraj Mbarouk**



Meet Jasmin Faraj Mbarouk who lives in Temeke district, Dar es Salaam. Her parents separated when she was still a child. She is currently living with her mother who is HIV positive. However, Jasmin's father is HIV free. In 2012, during her primary school years, she was diagnosed with HIV. She was told about her HIV status in 2013. Despite this challenging circumstance, Jasmin has persevered and continued to pursue her dreams.

In this regard, Jasmin is proud to share that she holds a diploma in Pharmaceutical Technology, a testament to her dedication to education and professional growth. Presently, she is contributing to her community as a volunteer at a private hospital, where she is able to apply her skills and make a meaningful impact on the lives of others.

***What challenges did you face growing up with HIV?***

Four of us were born into our family – three girls and a boy. Remarkably, my two younger sisters and my brother are HIV-free. Regrettably, I found myself as the only one living with HIV.

Surprisingly, at the family level, there was no stigma directed toward me. The source of the stigma, unfortunately, was me. I found myself internalizing the stigma and projecting it onto my siblings. I struggled with self-rejection, concealing resentment towards my sisters and brother simply because they were HIV-free, while I carried the weight of being HIV-infected. It was a personal battle that I had to overcome, realizing that the real issue was not with them but within myself.

This internal battle had a noticeable impact on various aspects of my life. Academically, my performance suffered, and I struggled with maintaining good health. The stress of my circumstances took a toll on my overall well-being, leading to poor eating habits and a general decline in my physical and mental health. I thought that I was not going to live long; I was going to die and would not attain my dream.

These challenges became difficult obstacles, shaping my perception of my own worth and potential. The internal struggles became a pivotal journey towards rediscovering self-value and resilience.

***At what age did you come across the Stepping Stones Program and how did you first learn about it?***

At the age of 14, I was introduced to Stepping Stones through PASADA. PASADA stands for Pastoral Activities and Services for people with AIDS Dar es Salaam Archdiocese. An invitation extended to both me and my mother led us to participate in the transformative Stepping Stones Training.

The training encompassed a diverse range of valuable topics, such as nutrition for improved health outcomes, addressing adolescence-related issues, exploring the metaphor of the "tree of life," enhancing relationship and communication skills between children and parents with an emphasis on mutual respect, managing anger triggered by external factors, and visualizing one's dreams. This transformative session became a turning point in my life. It instilled in me the realization that, despite living with HIV, I possess the capability to pursue and achieve my dreams.

The training served as a powerful platform that illuminated the fact that I was not alone in navigating life as a person living with HIV. Witnessing the shared joy and positivity among the participants created a sense of friendship, fostering a profound sense of happiness within me as well.

***What achievements followed after completion of the Stepping Stones Training?***

I have successfully overcome self-stigma and actively live the virtues I acquired during the training. One notable virtue is love, which has enabled me to eliminate any feelings of resentment towards my younger sisters and brother. My journey involved dedicated efforts to pursue my dream, culminating in the realization of becoming a pharmaceutical technician. I committed myself to diligent study, recognizing the crucial role of nutritious food in supporting ARV medication adherence.

The Stepping Stones Training was a transformative experience that played a pivotal role in shaping the journey of my life, bringing me to the stage where I am today. It illuminated the understanding that while HIV is a serious health condition, individuals can face mortality from various causes.

Equipped with the knowledge gained from the training, I am committed to sharing this invaluable information within my community to actively deal with the stigma associated with HIV. When people direct negative attitudes against others, I take it upon myself to intervene, challenging and changing these harmful ideas and attitudes. It's my way of contributing to a more informed and compassionate community.

I have gained the confidence to speak openly about HIV, addressing audiences anywhere. Unfortunately, my mother, who has been on ARV medication for an extended period, occasionally loses hope, experiencing a dip in her spirits. During these challenging times, I provide her with



counseling, drawing upon the lessons we learned from the Stepping Stones Training. Fortunately, she understands and appreciates the importance of maintaining a positive mindset.

Presently, we continuously reinforce the significance of adhering to ARV medication for both of us. This commitment has been crucial in preventing the complications of depression or opportunistic infections that could have put my mother's health at risk. Her pride in my advocacy work is a source of great encouragement and reinforces our shared dedication to maintaining good health through adherence to medication.

***What does your journey tell us about the transformative power of Programs like Stepping Stones?***

There was a time when I had completely lost hope, and that's when Stepping Stones came to my rescue. This program became a transformative force, revitalizing my outlook on life. I've not only regained a sense of self-worth but also extended compassion to my mother, two younger sisters, brother, and others in my community.

Academically, I have progressed significantly. Beyond personal growth, I'm actively involved in supporting HIV orphaned children who are also living with HIV. This support encompasses basic needs like food and the development of livelihood skills.

Reflecting on the profound impact of the Stepping Stones Programme on my life, I believe it has the potential to positively change the lives of many more individuals. I advocate for its broader exposure in various communities, as its transformative nature can bring about substantial positive change.