



Teenagers talk about sex, life and relationships

Five Stories of Change

Introduction to our Stories of Change

Over the years, we have seen and heard many affirming stories about how the *Auntie Stella* toolkit has had an impact not only on young people, but also on adults including teachers, parents, youth workers, community leaders and activists.

Time and again, young people say that they recognise themselves in the *Auntie Stella* stories – the letters reflect their experiences, challenges and questions. Working with the cards also enables them to identify what they need from their schools, families, clinics and communities, and gives them the skills and confidence to challenge and act on social assumptions and damaging values. The cards help them recognize and fight for what they believe is right.

Adults welcome *Auntie Stella* as a tool that can build a bridge of trust and open up dialogue between generations, and between youth and their leaders.

Users are also attracted by the *Auntie Stella* format. The cards are fun, easy and engaging to use, and create enriching ways for people to interact. When anyone, young or old, reads a question card letter, they automatically want to know what *Auntie Stella* will say in her answer, and if they agree with her.

We have chosen five of our users' stories to share here. This small selection shows us change at different levels: individual, family, community and in institutions. The stories are all from Zimbabwe; the names have been changed, but the events are all true.

What is Auntie Stella?

Auntie Stella: Teenagers talk about sex, life and relationships is an interactive reproductive health toolkit for young people aged 10 to 19, both in and out of school. It uses a series of question and answer cards that look like problem page letters written to 'agony aunts' in magazines, covering topics about sex, relationships and growing up.

Young people work in small groups to discuss the cards, guided by Talking and Action Points. Discussions are structured around a range of activities – roleplays, games, quizzes, and more – which encourage youth to consider how issues raised relate to their own lives and what they want to do about it.

The toolkit was produced in Zimbabwe in 2007. Since then it has been used in many countries in southern and east Africa, and has been translated into Shona and Ndebele (Zimbabwe), Chichewa (Malawi), Portuguese (Mozambique) and Swahili (Tanzania). The cards have been adapted for other countries where appropriate, and were updated in 2019 to reflect new developments in adolescent sexual and reproductive health.



Tawanda's Story

It isn't easy to admit that you've made a bad mistake in your life, but that's my story. My name is Tawanda, I'm sixteen and I live in Chitungwiza Town. In Form One, I got into a gang called Undefeated and we used to hang around in a shed behind the school library. When I started taking drugs, my life just went downhill. I thought joining the gang would make girls notice me, and marijuana would make me brave to talk to them. I even believed the drugs would help me to study – but of course none of this happened!

Then things got worse. I gave my school fees money to the gang as my 'contribution' for drugs. Of course, my parents found out and were so angry. They started treating me as if I was worthless. They wouldn't even give me lunch money. That was hard to bear. Two years later, the gang leaders left. I had no friends - no girlfriends either - and my parents didn't trust me. It was a bad time.

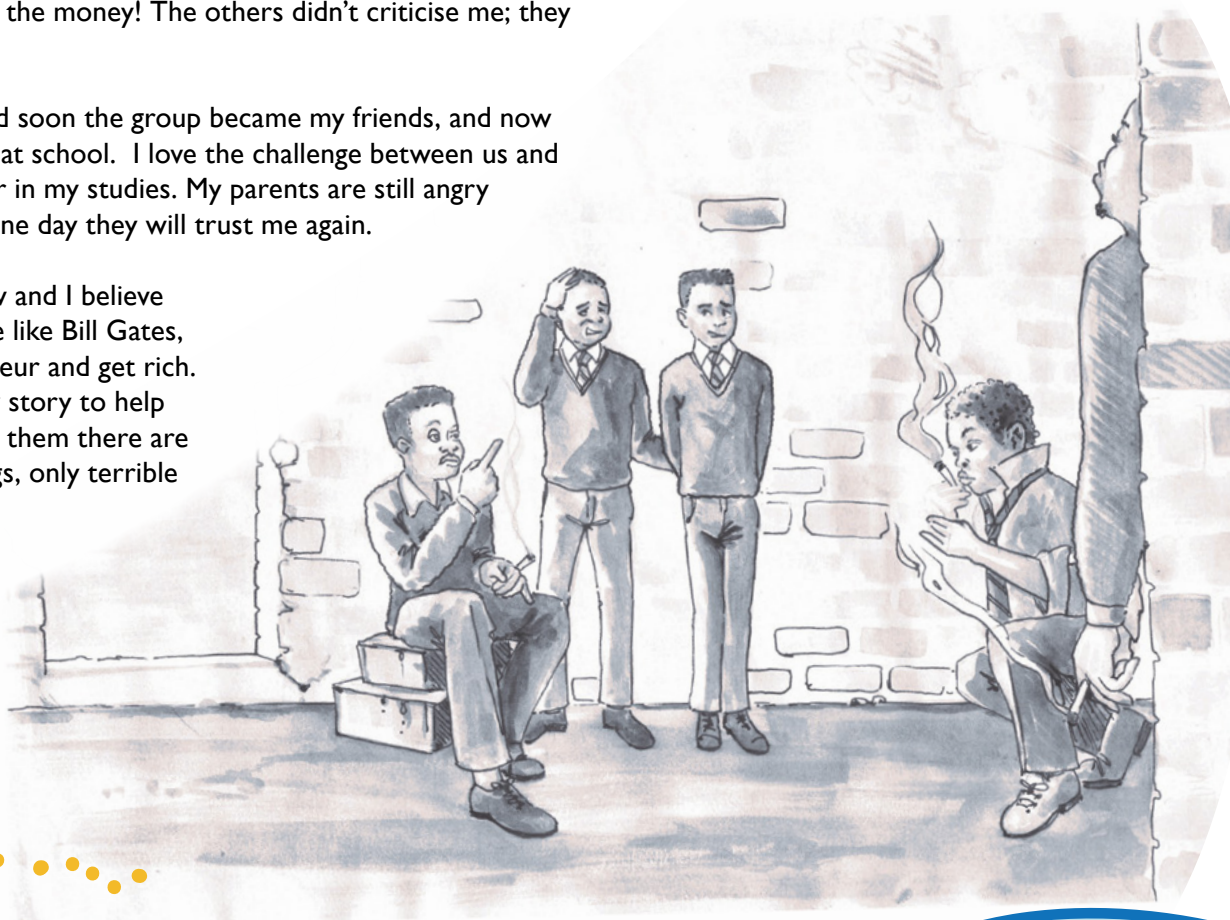
Then I met Mr Chitauru. I knew he was a soccer coach, and he must have noticed I wasn't happy. One day he showed me the *Auntie Stella* pack and Card 23, *Will mbanje cure my shyness?* I couldn't believe it – it was my story! When he invited me to an *Auntie Stella* group meeting, I was really nervous, but actually the others were friendly. The second time I went, I felt braver. I picked Card 23 and told them everything – the gang, the drugs, the money! The others didn't criticise me; they just wanted to help!

I kept going back - and soon the group became my friends, and now we're also competing at school. I love the challenge between us and I'm doing much better in my studies. My parents are still angry with me, but I hope one day they will trust me again.

I have big dreams now and I believe in myself. I want to be like Bill Gates, become an entrepreneur and get rich. And I can also use my story to help other people, and tell them there are no benefits from drugs, only terrible consequences.

Story 1

Our first story shows how *Auntie Stella* helped to change the life of one young man whose life, studies and family relationships were threatened when he joined a gang and began to take drugs. Fortunately, a community worker and a supportive *Auntie Stella* group rescued him from a situation which could have ruined his future.





Story 2

The second story is about how an *Auntie Stella* card gave a young girl the confidence to speak out about abuse. She and her friend knew that the *Auntie Stella* network would help them, and the answer card gave them the strength to try and seek justice.

Similo's Story

My name is Precious and I'm twelve years old. But this story isn't about me; it's about my best friend Similo. We stay near each other in a small town in Masvingo Province. We've always been in the same class at school.

When Similo was nine, her parents moved to South Africa to try and get work and a better life for the family. Similo went to stay at her uncle's house. She missed her parents, but it was OK at first.

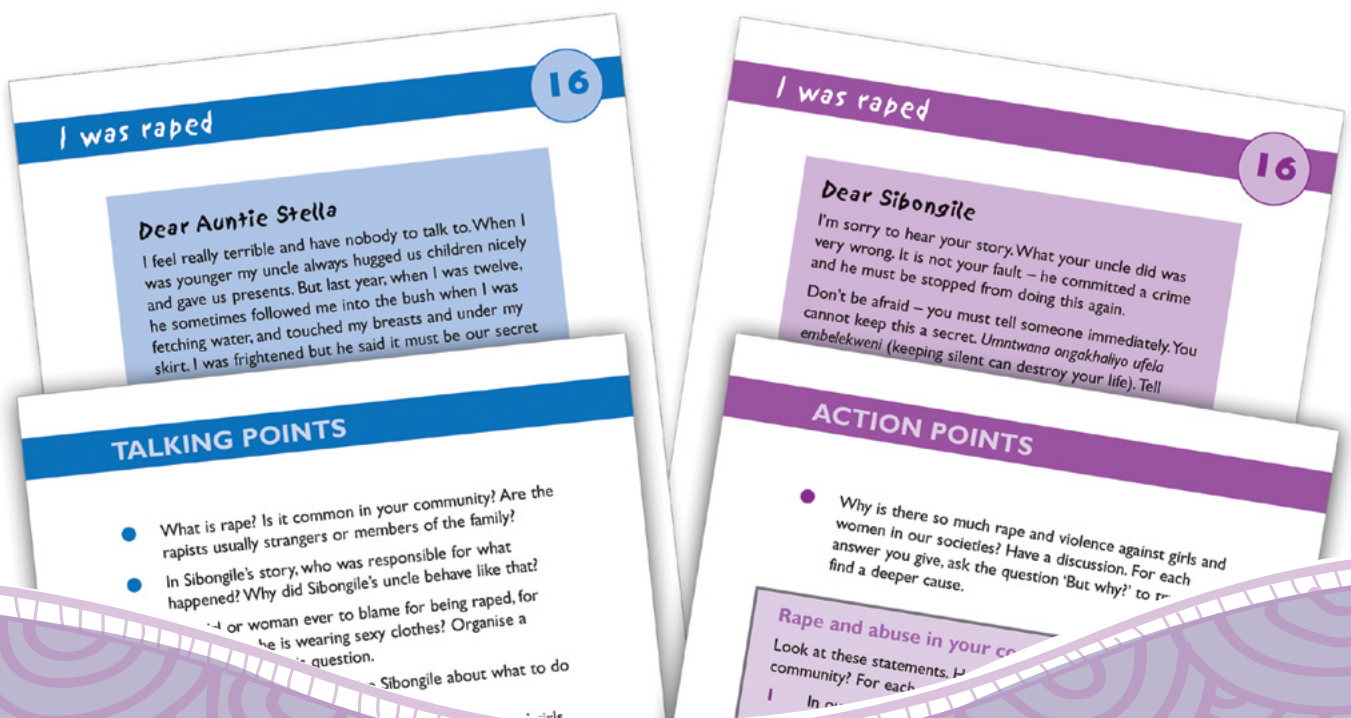
When we were in Grade 5, we started going to an *Auntie Stella* club. We really enjoyed discussing the topics on the cards because the young people who wrote the letters had lives like ours, and the same questions too. We learned a lot from Auntie Stella's answers.

One Tuesday, our group got Card 16, about a girl who was raped by her uncle. Afterwards, Similo suddenly told me that her uncle had also done that, in the April holidays, when nobody else was in the house. He was in his bedroom and called Similo to bring him his hat, but when she went in, he threw her onto the bed and raped her.

I couldn't believe my ears. It had happened weeks ago, but she hadn't said a word to anyone. She wanted me to promise not to tell anyone else, but Auntie Stella's answer said you must definitely tell an adult and get help. We were both scared, but we went to see the teacher. Similo started crying, so it was mostly me who had to tell the teacher what had happened.

The teacher helped us talk to Similo's family and then we went to the police to make a report. The police arrested the uncle. When he went to court, they found that he had raped other girls too, and he was put in prison. Similo's parents moved her to another relative's house, so she can feel safe now, though she's sometimes quieter than she used to be.

Our teacher was happy that *Auntie Stella* had shown Similo there were people who could help her. And me, I'm just glad that the cards made Similo brave enough to tell me what had happened, so she didn't have to keep that scary secret all to herself.





Story 3

The next story is a tale of awakening, told by a young adult woman, Nyarai. She describes how 'bumping into' *Auntie Stella* as a teenager changed her own life as well as her relationship with her parents. It also inspired her passion for a career working with young people and fighting to make their voices heard in the community.



Nyarai's Story


My name's Nyarai, and I'm a community worker with young people. I'm confident and outspoken, but I wasn't always like this. My father was headmaster of a local school in the Eastern Highlands, and my mother was a primary teacher. When I was growing up, I felt that everyone expected me to be the perfect daughter, because of my father's job. This was really stressful, so I became very quiet and always tried to behave well.

One day I went into our garage and saw this box of bright blue packs. They caught my eye so I guiltily took one to my room. It was an *Auntie Stella* toolkit. I supposed my dad was using these packs at his school, but I didn't know. I opened up the pack and started to read.

I was fascinated by the stories on the cards. It wasn't just one card that drew me in – it was all of them. The letters sounded just like me and my friends, and there were really clear answers to lots of my own questions. I told my younger sister, but nobody else. I felt I would die if anyone found out that I knew about sex and AIDS and getting pregnant. We never discussed these issues openly, not in our culture and not in our family.

One day, however, my secret was discovered! My mother walked in on me reading the cards - they were all over the room! Surprisingly, she wasn't angry at all, and said there was nothing wrong with asking these questions. After this, we started having conversations about things on the cards – conversations I could never have imagined before. I wish this had happened earlier, but I guess *Auntie Stella* was also teaching my parents to open up.

This experience made a huge difference to me, and even led to my career - working to help young people learn to make wise and informed decisions for their lives. I also want communities to listen to and support young people. I am a parent myself now, and look forward to using the cards with my kids later. My journey with *Auntie Stella* has been long – and happily I know that it is far from over.



Judith's Story

This doesn't start off as a story about *Auntie Stella*, but just be patient; it will come.

My name is Judith and I work with a project that distributes sanitary pads to girls in rural Matabeleland. Each month I take the pads, along with bread and orange drink, to three sites, where several pastors volunteer to help us. This initially surprised us, because in our culture men never talk about menstruation, and churches can often be conservative.

We also introduced the pastors to *Auntie Stella*. One of them, Pastor Maseko, saw it as a perfect tool for his work, providing – as he said - “a bridge that builds trust between generations.” He especially thought the pack was important for youth with no parents or for those who had no guidance about growing up.

When the girls in the pastor's village first saw the cards, they gasped and giggled, but he encouraged them not to be shy. Soon they were talking eagerly, and they also produced plays about the situations.

However, there was one problem. Every month, the pastor seemed to be taking half of the goods away after the sessions. He seemed like a man of God, but I was worried. One day, I followed him outside, and found him loading his bike with pads, orange drink, and bread - and of course *Auntie Stella* and his Bible. He put logs across the carrier to strengthen it, and it was stacked up high, tied securely with black rubber ropes. What was he doing with the extra stuff?

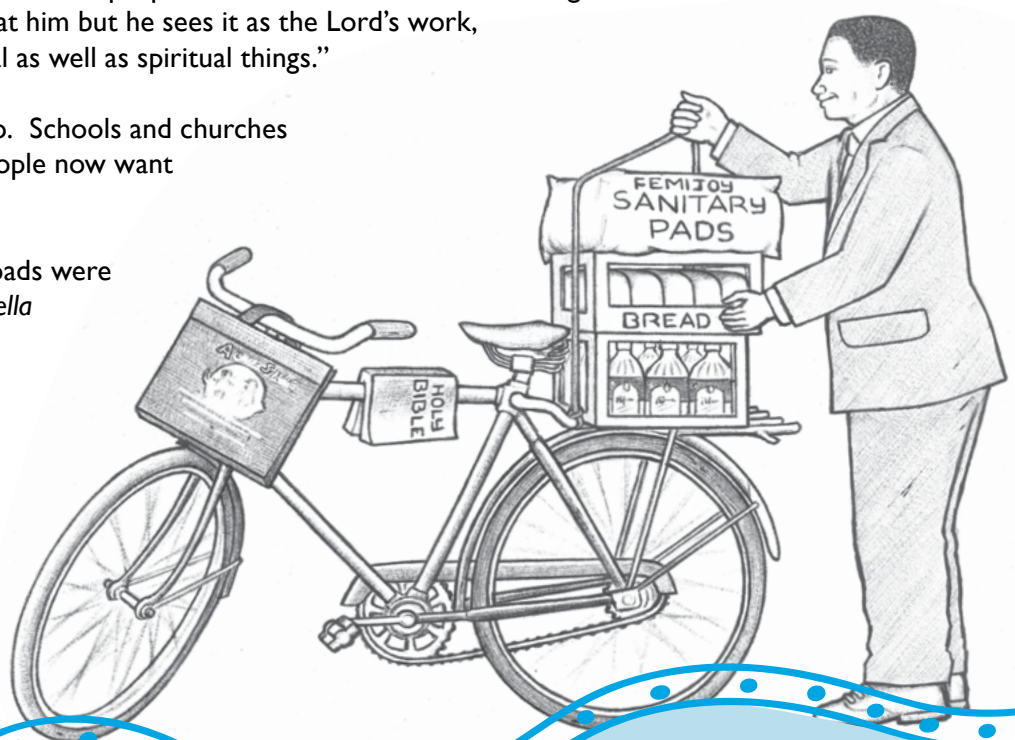
His wife explained everything. She told us that the next day the Pastor would leave home early and cycle to three other schools - half a day's hot and dusty journey. “It's too far for the girls to walk to us, but he really cares that they get proper sanitary pads – and also proper information and he knows the girls are benefitting. Some people laugh at him but he sees it as the Lord's work, guiding young people in physical as well as spiritual things.”

Others around are changing too. Schools and churches want *Auntie Stella* packs, and people now want sessions for boys as well!

Like I said before, the sanitary pads were the starting point. But *Auntie Stella* made a huge difference too!

Story 4

This story is told through the eyes of Judith, another community worker, who explains how *Auntie Stella* is inspiring one pastor to go beyond the expectations of his traditional culture and his church in working with young people. “*Auntie Stella* is like his second Bible,” she says.



Getrude's story

My name is Getrude and I live in a remote rural area in the eastern part of Zimbabwe. I married into this community years ago but lots of people have forgotten my real name. They just call me "Auntie Stella", after the woman who answers the letters. I don't mind that at all. In fact, I feel honoured.

It all started back in 2006. I went to a workshop about *Auntie Stella* and it made me realise that our young people don't have the rights or information or skills they need to deal with growing up. But I was excited - now I had a methodology that could help them speak out and learn to make wise decisions for their lives.

Our leaders asked me to give feedback at a community gathering. I showed everybody how we use *Auntie Stella*, with Card 3 as an example. It's about *chiramulsibale*, where a man teases his wife's young sister - but sometimes abuses this and has sex with her. Then some children performed a drama about the story. This was a real eye-opener for people, and there was a huge discussion. The community began to realise that some cultural values were bringing suffering, especially to girls.



Quite a lot of things happened in the community after this meeting. *Chiramu* was completely forbidden by the community leaders, as well as *Ngozi* where girls are given as payment to appease avenging spirits in family disputes. They also took steps to enforce and monitor the law forbidding marriages with girls under the legal age, and to make sure girls do not drop out of school.

It wasn't only *Auntie Stella* that caused these changes. AIDS organisations had been working in our area before, and the community was well aware of HIV and AIDS. So the *chiramu* card and drama were like seeds falling onto already prepared ground.

We still hold *Auntie Stella* sessions at all community and youth meetings, and in schools. It helps build more understanding of youth needs. I even adapt the methods for counselling young couples, or dealing with conflicts in the community.

I really love this work. Being my people's very own Auntie Stella makes me proud, and inspires me to carry on. And it's great when I see how we've used AS.



Story 5

Like Nyarai and Judith, Getrude is a community activist – but she has also become a real-life Auntie Stella to everybody around. Her story tells us about how change can happen in institutions, with community leaders making new laws to protect the rights of young people, especially girls.



If you want a copy of Auntie Stella, please contact the Training and Research Support Centre at admin@tarasc.org or go to our website at www.tarasc.org to download a soft copy. Make sure you download all 3 files of the 2019 version! We also look forward to hearing your stories about changes Auntie Stella has made in your lives.