Reviewer's report

Title: Evaluation of Stepping Stones as a tool for changing knowledge, attitudes and behaviors associated with gender, relationships and HIV risk in Karnataka, India

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Reviewer: Rachel Jewkes

Reviewer's report:

This paper has been considerably improved by its revisions. However there remain an number of problems. If these are not fixed this paper should not be published. I personally think this would be a pity as there are interesting findings here, I just feel this paper is not written yet as 'science' although it is now heading in that direction.

The Abstract - this doesn't actually reflect the findings of the paper, nor its conclusions. The results and discussion sections needs to be redrafted to reflect the results and conclusions in a considered way.

Discussion - the limitations section should be in the discussion

The discussion of the study findings is much too heavily infused by the personal opinion of the authors. The authors clearly expected that the number of people involved in Stepping Stones (which I imagine was 1 in 30 if the adult village population - is that right) would be enough for 'village level' transformation. Why do they expect this? what is the scientific basis for expecting a 1 in 30 ratio is reasonable (rather than a 1 in 10 or 1 in 10 or 1 in 5). If they are to make judgements these must be evidence based. If they can't cite other authors on this issue they need to rather discuss it as a matter for reflection and further research. The same applies for expected attitude and knowledge change. Afterall in schools most learners only get 60% or less on exams - what's the basis for expecting 100% change in knowledge from an intervention like Stepping Stones. there is a complex literature on attitude change - how it is obtained and so forth. This isn't engaged with.

Overall I would like to see the paper revised again and the authors must engage with the theoretical literature on behaviour change if they are to make a scientific contribution to this area of knowledge (which is what they are trying to do).

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I have worked with the intervention Stepping Stones in research and behaviour change settings and distribute manuals of the South African adaptation on a not for profit basis.