Because of temptations: children, sex and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania
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My interest in children and working with children has a very pragmatic basis. I am convinced that in a new and unfamiliar environment, children are the best guides you can have. As a newcomer in a different culture it is often difficult to ‘settle in’. My first working experience with children was as an intern at the pediatric department of a Dutch hospital, when I was nineteen. I did not like the hospital at all: the smell, the seriousness, the protocols and hierarchies. Being unfamiliar with the social rules, the language, the hospital culture, I made mistake after mistake. I took refuge in the common room with the children, who shared my opinion of the hospital. During my first days, the children explained to me who was who and who was doing what and they took me around to explore the pediatric wing. The children introduced me to their parents and started to ask me to accompany them when they had to see the doctor or go for tests. Through the children I found a way of communicating with the adults in the hospital. They helped me to define my position and role within that setting and made me feel at ease.

This scenario was repeated a few years later, during my visits to Benin and Tanzania. Even without me speaking the language the children would come to my house and just hang around, helping me out with household tasks or we would play games. The children were always the first to teach me new words and to give me a tour of their areas. They would show me where to get my groceries and in Benin, explained to me where to go to the toilet and what to use for toilet paper. Children would laugh about my silly questions instead of judging me for it. They liked to give me answers and explanations. They facilitated my introduction to adults and I found that adults were quicker to accept me when they saw that their children accepted me.

During my time at the hospital, I learned how interesting it is to speak with children first about their illness before learning the medical diagnosis from doctors, nurses or parents. I became fascinated with the children’s perceptions, explanations, logic and coping strategies. This experience certainly influenced my choice to study children’s perceptions of disease transmission and hygiene, a few years later in Benin. In the evenings I would discuss my day with the neighborhood kids and ask them questions. I found that they not only liked to explain
things to me, but also liked to add their own opinions. I noticed how much they actually see, how they analyze the behavior of others around them and come to conclusions about good and bad, injustices and contradictions. They became my lens for studying and understanding their culture. When I went to Tanzania for the study described in this book, it was a logical step to ask children to help me with interpretations and to involve them as co-researchers.

My hope for this book is to show how fascinating, interesting and important it is to study children perceptions of what is at stake for them, especially regarding sex and sexuality. My greatest hope is for children and youth to become more involved in the design and implementation of the sexual health interventions that target them. Their meaningful participation is crucial for the effectiveness of those interventions and for our joint fight against HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, gender injustices and maternal mortality.

My gratitude first and foremost goes to them, to all the children who helped me to understand their realities, concerns, hopes and wishes. For their patience, courage, humor, enthusiasm, energy, creativity and insights. I will attempt to represent their ideas and experiences as closely as possible in this book. My contact with the children in Tanzania would not have been possible without the help of many people. I am particularly indebted to my friend, research assistant and interpreter Godfrey. Without your help and hard work this research would not have been possible and would not have been so much fun! You have become a brother to me.

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