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# TALKING ABOUT SOLIDARITY

“We hope that Canadian grandmothers will recognize our strength — the spirit of *'ubuntu'* — taking care of each other. We have experience in activism and advocacy, we know what to do and what we need... give us the support and we will show you what we can do!”



The Grandmothers' Gathering began with workshops in which African and Canadian grandmothers met separately. "Talking About Solidarity" gave both groups (in all their internal diversity) the chance to meet amongst themselves and talk about their expectations, hopes and concerns about the upcoming two days' worth of intensive and interactive workshops. The work of building solidarity with each other and across continents required a common understanding and common 'language', and this section tries to capture the insights the grandmothers shared and the challenges they surmounted. The staff and volunteers of the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF) were unanimous in our realization, as we witnessed the proceedings, that both groups exhibited exceptional grace, mutual support and love, as they began to build a movement together.

The African grandmothers raised a number of similar issues as they set the stage in the opening sessions: a desire to create networks amongst themselves, to learn about the Canadian grandmothers, and to determine how they could work together to create awareness and generate financial support. They expressed an urgent desire to be heard and tell their stories, and a commitment to continue to speak out and garner support because they felt a deep sense of responsibility to thousands of other grandmothers in Africa who, like them, are struggling with the effects of the pandemic.

The theme of 'strength in unity' resonated throughout. The African grandmothers' sentiment, "You can't break us

when we are together" was embraced by all. One group described its metaphor of fashioning a quilt from scraps of garbage, or "making something out of nothing," as they do when they come together to develop community projects with day-care, gardens, feeding programmes and income-generating schemes. GAPA — the Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS from South Africa — took this analogy further, demonstrating how they use a patchwork quilt as a symbol of a grandmother who has had to remake herself after losing everything; by working with other grandmothers, a strong whole is reconstructed from an individual whose life has been torn apart. Other African grandmothers brought a bunch of small sticks and showed how one stick alone is easy to snap, two sticks together are harder, and three or more bundled together are unbreakable.

Everyone assembled was determined to keep African grandmothers' voices front and centre. A strong theme that emerged from the solidarity workshops was that the African grandmothers should set the agenda and determine the kind of support to flow from the Gathering. A sense of unity was established early, generated by the shared intent to offer a forum, legitimacy and respect to a legion of older women in Africa from whom the world has never heard directly. The grandmothers from Africa often described their personal journeys from grief, suicidal thoughts, immobility and isolation to becoming community organizers in their villages and role models of survival and hope



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for both their sisters and grandchildren. They have become agents of change, bringing a wealth of experience, compassion and skills to an indescribably complex problem, and a deep understanding of the solutions that are needed. They lack only the resources and support to deal with the devastation caused by their losses — all of them have lost children, and some have lost multiple children, spouses, siblings and orphaned grandchildren. They described their fundamental need for funds to feed and educate their grandchildren and to provide them with adequate shelter. They also spoke of their need for support to break through the stigma and discrimination they all keenly felt.

Some participants may have arrived assuming that the African grandmothers were victims without the skills to improve their situations. Everyone left thinking of them as resilient and courageous women, open about their hardship and their journey from agony to survival, joyous in their appreciation of life and the opportunity to learn and share their thoughts. It was impossible

not to be inspired and moved by them.

*“If we agree with each other that ‘old is gold’, then what should be done to rescue these grandmothers from this nightmare?”*

At the same time, we heard of the enormity of the challenges the African grandmothers face, including:

- Their fears about the death surrounding them;
- The hardship and uncertainty of those caring for children who are HIV-positive;
- The pervasive crisis of hunger;
- Their lack of adequate shelter and the constant threat of homelessness;
- The need for steady incomes and income-generating programmes;
- The desperate need for psychosocial support for both the adults and their grandchildren;
- The deep fear that nothing would change to break through the stigma around HIV/AIDS, and that the cycle

of infection and death would continue into the next generation;

- The need for adequate pensions;
- The urgent need for the schooling that could secure a future for their grandchildren — from the abolition of school fees and beyond, to money for books, shoes, pencils, uniforms and test fees;
- The essential need to have space and a place to grieve, including ongoing support groups and programmes for both the women and their grandchildren.

*“I had lost hope but now I have hope again from this weekend. I feel big again...we have not been forgotten”*

Canadian grandmothers discussed their apprehension about how to bridge the gap between their own experiences and those of the African grandmothers, and expressed their worries about the language barriers, the cultural divides and the diversity of ideas from Canadians about how to respond. The idea of establishing networks in Canada that could provide support through fundraising, advocacy and education was raised in several groups. The Canadian


grandmothers said they had come into the Gathering determined to assist in meaningful and concrete ways, but then wondered over and over again — how was this to be achieved? Fears about raising hopes and expectations and then failing to deliver were expressed in several workshops, as was a commitment to maintain the energy of the Gathering and succeed in keeping grandmothers on the agenda at local and national levels. No one wanted mere talk; action was on everyone’s mind.

*“We need to establish a sense of reciprocity with our African sisters. They need to know that they are our inspiration, that we both are getting something from this relationship.”*

Canadian grandmothers wanted to learn from one another and from the African grandmothers — and to leave with clear ideas about how to make their response tangible and meaningful for their African counterparts. The Canadian workshops discussed ideas about networking tools (e.g. listservs, websites, national lobbying and fundraising initiatives and other forms of continued coordination and communication) as a first attempt was made to examine the

## GRANNIES’ STORIES

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Every African grandmother at the Gathering came with a story of hardship, sorrow, courage and the determination to make life better for themselves, their orphaned grandchildren and their communities. Several of the grannies talked about how difficult it was to speak of their lives and losses and how it “opened old wounds.” During workshops, many broke down as they spoke of their lost children and their grandchildren, and those in their company wept with empathy and shared sorrow. And yet,

nearly every workshop ended in joyous song, reflecting the triumph of the spirit, the hope that can be found within the depths of despair, and the strength in solidarity that the bereaved were forging with their sisters from Africa and from Canada.

We honour all of them, and share just a few of their stories here.

meaning of solidarity, and of building a movement of support in Canada. The Foundation was expected to continue its support by providing information about the Canadian groups that exist and what they are doing, as well as information about the African grandmothers and how the various projects support them on an ongoing basis.

Canadian grandmothers explored the range of skills and experience they brought as educators, medical and health experts, administrators, drummers, artists, community developers, counsellors, social workers, business women, international development workers and writers, and concluded that, together, they represented a wealth of expertise, energy and principles, and shared in common an understanding of the importance of relationships between grandmothers and grandchildren. They also shared a commitment to a diverse movement that would include grandmothers from a wide range of backgrounds, engage grandfathers, and work with young people to reinforce the connection between generations.



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### COMMON GROUND

Both sets of working groups discussed the fact that their particular kinds of wisdom, know-how and experience often are not perceived as ‘expertise’, although these are the life skills that contribute to working across differences and lead to mutual respect. They discussed the need for all societies to recognize and value the roles that older women play in their communities, even when encumbered by a scarcity of resources. Many grandmothers spoke of the importance of “head and heart working together.”

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### Laurance Mukamurangwa

Rwanda Women’s Network, Kigali, Rwanda

Laurance tells us that she is a survivor of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, a widow, mother of six children and a grandmother of four. She lives at the Village of Hope, a group of 20 houses constructed by the Rwanda Women’s Network, [RWN], in Kigali Urban Province in the country’s capital city.

“I am a grassroots woman who doesn’t know how to read or write but who is a very powerful member of the RWN, as a mobilizer and an activist. I came into contact with RWN when I joined the Polyclinic of Hope project in 1995 as a victim of rape during the 1994 genocide. I am HIV/AIDS-positive as a result of mass rape during the genocide and have been living positively for 11 years. I am the

chairwoman of the home-based care group in my sector. It’s really a problem for us because we don’t have anything and must get food, clothes and school supplies, and you must remember that I am sick and I will die. The grandchildren are still young so you cannot tell them anything about the disease. But we tell them to love each other so that when the time comes and I can no longer be there, they will help each other.”

Laurance is 48, and nurtures as well as supports her four grandchildren, aged three months to five years, despite the hardship she has suffered. She told us that there are 20 grandmothers in her village looking after hundreds of orphaned children.



Several exercises were used to get to know one another. In some groups, members “interviewed” and introduced the women they were sitting beside; others brought a meaningful token into the discussion to help them begin talking about loss and grief; some facilitators encouraged group members to look carefully at one another and find similarities (for instance, the same glasses, the same caring expression, grey hair, gaps in her teeth that show when she smiles). The grandmothers explored what each woman present had in her heart, and found “love, self-awareness, song, a willingness to share problems with others, fear, hope and deep love for our grandchildren, the desire to comfort, the wisdom of generations, courage, plans for the future, trepidation about the future” and a reliance on song to communicate values and emotion. One group of Canadian grandmothers cheered one another for being “strong, rebellious and rowdy,” reflecting the unanimous and absolute certainty amongst all the grannies that as women, they are a powerful force.

Some unanticipated common ground was revealed. Aboriginal grandmothers from Nova Scotia, the We’koqma’q Qewiskwa’q Drum Group, described for the Africans the obscene chapter of recent Canadian history when First Nations children were forcibly removed from their homes and taken to Residential Schools. They explained that this experience robbed both their own generation and their children of healthy parents. Years later, as grandmothers, many of them are getting a second chance, becoming parents again as they step in to take care of grandchildren while their own children continue to battle the effects of this poisonous legacy. They talked about the universality of grief when loss is experienced by entire communities as well as at the individual level. The African grandmothers were stunned and moved by the stories of the Aboriginal grandmothers and the parallel hardship of their experiences.

There was a mutual recognition that worry about money is the number one priority amidst all the suffering, and that without lobbying for policy change, individual philanthropy could only go so far towards securing sustainable futures for orphaned grandchildren. African grannies spoke of their wish that they had access to their governments, and could hold them accountable for changing their circumstance. Because the demands of their daily lives already stretch them to the limit, the African grandmothers were thrilled by the Canadian grandmothers’ interest in lobbying internationally for change. And finally, the need for access to treatment and the desperate need for a cure for HIV/AIDS was in everyone’s mind. South African grandmothers gave it voice: “We need to shout to the whole world that they must try, by all means, to give treatment and a cure to each and every one who is positive”.

A preoccupation of all present was the question of how to channel funds and manage relationships after the Gathering. Many of the Canadian grandmothers expressed the desire to be connected in a deeper way to grandmothers in Africa, and felt that this was essential to inspire others to give and to continue the momentum and commitment that they felt after meeting the African grannies at the Gathering.

### ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS

There were some relationships which had already been established, prior to the Gathering, as a result of independent visits by more than one Canadian grandmothers' group to Africa. The nature of those relationships and what was being learned from them was discussed in detail. At the end of the Gathering, the African grandmothers and project coordinators led a discussion on this ongoing theme, but since it was such a clear focus in the Canadian grandmothers' initial Talking About Solidarity workshops, we will address it here.

African project coordinators and grandmothers discussed the problems around letter writing, earmarking funds for specific projects and 'adopting' groups and/or individual grandmothers, and suggested that these were not the most useful or tenable tools to maintain connections.

On the subject of earmarking, many of the African participants expressed deep concern, explaining that they were intensely aware of the overwhelming need of so many others — groups and grandmothers across all of Africa — and they were anxious not to benefit unduly simply because they were the groups and grannies fortunate enough to attend the Gathering in person. They talked about the democratic processes they had used to prepare, to represent their groups at home, and to participate in the Gathering: holding village meet-

ings, discussion groups and engaging in a thoughtful selection process. They saw themselves as 'delegates' with the weighty responsibility of representing legions of grandmothers — both those they knew personally and the literally hundreds of thousands of grandmothers they would never meet across sub-Saharan Africa. In advance of the Gathering, they had convened meetings to exchange stories, craft messages, and choose the priorities to bring to the Gathering so that they could adequately represent the concerns of all. They felt fortunate not to have been among their peers who were prohibited from taking on this representative role by obstacles ranging from poor health, to overwhelming burdens of care, or because they had never been issued the birth certificate required to obtain a visa, or because they lacked the resources, information or access to translation to form or join a



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grandmothers' group. Knowing that there were so many others, the delegates asked the grandmothers from Canada to trust the Foundation (or other organizations they support doing good work in addressing Africa's AIDS pandemic) to know what was happening on the ground and where the need was greatest.

Several project coordinators rose to talk about letter writing and 'twinning,' about how good those had sounded to them when they first struck such relationships, but how onerous and challenging they had eventually proven to be. Many of the grandmothers could not write, and still others were dealing with too much in their daily lives to respond to all the correspondence they received. As a result, some of the grandmothers, whose circumstances allowed them to keep up communications, were benefiting from donations sent directly to them, while others were not, causing much unhappiness and discord in the groups. The project coordinators were also concerned about the disappointment that a lack of consistent and regular communication had caused for those on the other end of these relationships — and had decided with the individual

grandmothers that accountability to donors was something which the projects were better able to manage than the individual beneficiaries.

The consensus amongst the African participants was that they deeply valued and appreciated the direct contact at the Gathering, and were eager to share the news of the commitment and love of the Canadian grannies with their sisters at home. But, they themselves acknowledged that they represented only a small part of the whole, and hoped that their representation would result in trusted donors in Canada continuing to fund an increasing number of groups supporting grandmothers across the continent.

The SLF was present for this discussion and heard both imperatives — the need to continue its support to more and more groups supporting grannies in Africa, and the need to ensure that Canadian grandmothers had a strong sense of what their money was doing on the ground and how it was helping in concrete ways. It was a challenging and intensely productive meeting.

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### **Mary Anna Beer** York Region, Ontario

Mary Anna tells her story: "I fell in love with Africa upon first setting foot on the continent in 1993. At that time, I was introduced to many people in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. I knew I would return one day. In 1997 and 2002, I [volunteered] for Habitat for Humanity in Malawi and South Africa. In all three of those early trips, I was aware of and met many people living with HIV/AIDS.

In 2003, I was chosen as one of four retired teachers to study the impact of HIV/AIDS on the education system in Tanzania, a trip sponsored by RTO (Retired Teachers of Ontario) and World Vision. On that mission, I learned a great deal about the impact of AIDS and began to see and meet older women who were caregivers.

In late 2003, a small group of inspired individuals started a committee in York Region. Our goals were to raise awareness of the AIDS pandemic in Africa throughout York Region and raise funds for the Stephen Lewis Foundation. A major success of the York Region Committee in Support of the Stephen Lewis Foundation was the involvement of the York Region District School Board (YRDSB). In 2004, the YRDSB sent a team of senior people to study the AIDS situation in South Africa and visit some of the projects supported by the SLF. I was also part of that trip.

Finally, in 2005, I traveled to Kenya where I worked in a facility for rescued street children near Nairobi and moved on to South Africa to work with orphaned and vulnerable

Everyone agreed that it was important to share the stories and the messages from the Gathering with the world. Many expressed a desire to have a Grandmothers' Day annually which could be celebrated across regions. There was a sense of urgency, in the desire of all, to sustain the momentum created by the Gathering and continue both the calls for and the flow of support to the African grandmothers. One grandmother expressed the sentiment of many — that this should be a wake-up call for leaders, politicians, activists and donors around the world.



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children. Again, the evidence of grandmothers caring for young children was everywhere.

This summer, Africa came to me in the form of the wonderfully inspirational Grandmothers Gathering. It was all I had hoped it would be. I was able to meet and bond with women from the eight countries to which I had traveled, and to gain insight into some issues in countries to which I had not.

I feel this Campaign is an extremely worthy one and I know the excitement and commitment of the Canadians will sustain it for a very long time."

*Mary Anna Beer is a Special Advisor to the SLF for the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign in Canada*

