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CARING FOR OUR GRANDCHILDREN

*“In North America, we are notorious for ‘Me, Mine, and More’ and we have got to be ‘Ours, Us and Enough.’
If I were to make a wish for any child, it would be ‘Enough’ – enough love, enough food, enough medicine, enough uniforms for school.”*

“African culture never had a word for orphan. Children belonged to everybody.”



Profound and pivotal conversations took place at the session focusing on orphaned grandchildren and other vulnerable children. The African grandmothers brought us sad and painful information, but at the same time showed remarkable insight and thoughtfulness. Their resilience shone through every discussion, and demonstrated vividly why there is still so much hope for these children.

From Canadian grandmothers, we heard repeated expressions of concern, compassion, and empathy. Together, we were struck by the echoing sentiments of African women with little or no income, striving to assure quality lives for their grandchildren. We learned of the similar concerns and fears of African women who had never met, the common enormity of their loss and circumstance, and their shared determination to guarantee their grandchildren hope for the future.

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African grandmothers spoke of their worries that grandchildren with HIV would become sicker and die without proper nutrition. They agonized that without education, the girls would grow up poor, fall prey to predatory males, and trade sex for illusory security. They were troubled by fears that the children might grow up emotionally unstable with all the grief, anger, and bewilderment they have experienced. Their

anxiety and constant concern were all-pervasive.

Grandmothers from both continents — though often tearful — engaged in workshops with a sense of urgency. Canadian grandmothers tried to imagine losing their own children and caring for their grandchildren, but soon realized that the context, in which their African counterparts are surviving, confounds that exercise. They wondered, instead: How do these extraordinary women find the resources to be effective parents to children, some HIV-positive, who have lost both parents, and who are now watching friends, family, and teachers slip away?

The grandmothers lamented that the parenting skills they had relied upon when raising their own children, were clearly not adequate to the task at hand. In a previous generation of child-rearing, a quiet child was generally seen as obedient, whereas in the present context, a child who doesn't cry or who is withdrawn could be suffering from deep anger or trauma or both. Grandmothers have had to add to their workloads the job of learning to explain difficult realities to young children and to assure them that they are loved.

“African tradition took it for granted that women are to look after children, to be at home — so they never bothered to take [girls] to school ... When you are educated and learned, you'll have an earning, and with an earning, you'll have your own decisions. Nobody will decide for you.”



Grandmothers told us of the differences in expectations, across generations, about how children should relate to elders. And the differences they encountered, even in understanding spoken vernacular, between children raised in towns and their country grandmothers. We heard about the need to face these new challenges, by integrating the natural and constant emotional care that children may receive from their grannies, with more formal advice and counselling. Many of the projects were providing this kind of guidance.

African grannies also pointed out that, beyond the emotional strain, providing constant stimulation and physical care to infants and toddlers is particularly demanding and exhausting for them. They gave us a glimpse of those hardships, particularly when raising HIV-positive children: the constant worry, the difficulty of administering drugs

properly, the lack of money for drugs, the fear of stigmatization and disclosure (both to the child and the community), and the difficulties in getting children to the doctor or nurse on a regular basis, without transportation.

"All my children are all our children."

As noted earlier, the subtext to many of the discussions was the grandmothers' pervasive fear about what would happen after they died. Who would care for the children? How would they bear loss heaped upon loss? How would they recover? Who would become their parents and give them the nurturing and continuity that they so desperately need? Where would the money come from to ensure that they could continue their education? Would they be able to stay together? There are no easy answers, but the involvement of the projects made the grandmothers feel hopeful. Formally or informally, the

grassroots projects provide some forum for discussion of these fears, as well as a place for grannies to draw together, find solutions, and assure each other that someone will always be there to care for their families.

Grannies told us of their fears that the girls in their care will be more susceptible to early pregnancy, early marriage, or other forms of sexual exploitation because of their economic and emotional vulnerability. Even with the grandmothers' best efforts, it is unavoidable that many of the older grandchildren are already responsible for the well-being of their siblings, and lack adequate shelter and security.

We heard education raised as a preoccupation in all the workshops dealing with orphan care. African participants told us that while school fees have been abolished in some of their countries, the prohibitive costs of shoes, uniforms and books often keep children from enrolling. One grandmother described how she had lost nine children, some to AIDS, and was raising her six grandchildren. She works in the fields and brings in so little income that she can only afford to send

one child to school. Another grandmother told of losing all her brothers and their spouses, and caring for 11 nieces and nephews and one grandchild. But what sat most heavily on her mind was the fact that she had no idea how she would pay the school fees that would be due when she returned home.

"I would have liked one or two of the kids . . . to get educated and start work so that they can look after the others, in case I die. That's why I pray and hope — that two or three can finish school and look after the others."

The grandmothers clearly know the pivotal role of education as an escape from the poverty that could otherwise trap their grandchildren in a cycle of disempowerment, disenfranchisement, despair, and even death. But, few could afford it. The Canadian grandmothers were shocked to hear how little money it took to send a child to school — as little as US\$40 a year in Malawi and under US\$100 annually in Kenya — and by stories about children who shared a pair of shoes, alternating days for the long walk to school to attend classes. Grandmothers also emphasized that some schools now provide the children

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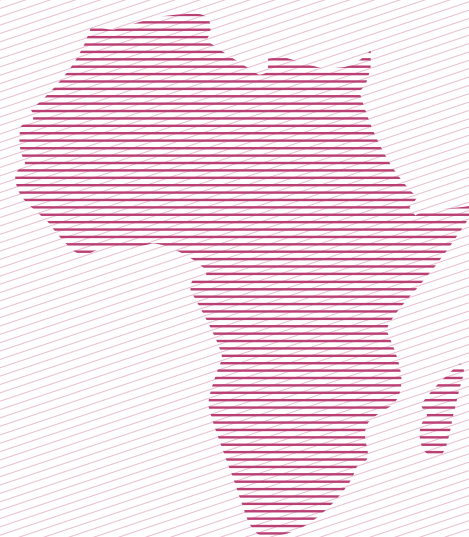
Martha Ndui Mahindu

CABDA (Community Asset Building and Development Action)
Vihaga District, Western Kenya

Martha speaks: "I have six children and six grandchildren. I lost two of my children to HIV/AIDS. My husband is jobless. I am part of CABDA, a group of 45 women with 180 children who are orphans."

"Before I was just going around looking to get a job to feed the family." Maria describes how she would often go without eating for two or three days, with nothing to give the children or grandchildren. She received a loan from CABDA, and now she takes care of her own six orphaned grandchildren and three other children who are orphaned and HIV-positive. She works in a tiny shop where she sells

sugar, paraffin and cooking oil, and with the proceeds, feeds the orphans.





with a much-needed meal, and all provide them with continuity in lives otherwise dominated by unwelcome change and uncertainty.

They stressed the importance of education beyond the primary years. “We do not want to waste brains,” said one,

while another added, “All our children should go to school, up to university.” The grannies agreed. “Knowing that kids have hope for a better future makes it easier for us.” Projects presented a number of helpful models and ideas to get girls into school and keep them there, including working closely with the whole

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Ruth James British Columbia, Canada

Ruth speaks: “To be part of the Grandmothers’ Gathering is to be entrusted with a new way of thinking. The African she-heroes and their ability to connect, to break into song, ululate, and hug some of us (rather stiff, well-meaning Canadians) after sharing some of the most heart-rending life narratives, shattered our assumptions. Being a part of circular seminars, with vividly dressed women interspersed with pale Birkenstock-clad ladies who listened closely, hearing that grandmothers of Africa had survived colonialism, in some cases apartheid, loss of their adult children, and now were caring for many orphaned children with little or no resources, was like a sting ray to consciousness. Our coun-

try has been so fortunate! There is an untapped resource amongst women of our age. Beware, politicians — and maybe the male sex, too!

The kaleidoscope of the continent of Africa first crept into my heart during the late 1970’s. I was fortunate to become part of a charity with a mandate of providing African story-books to African children.

On July 20, 2004, two tiny identical twin granddaughters came into our world in North Vancouver, Canada. From the time they were identified as late cell division twins, developing in just one amniotic sac, a team of doctors monitored their well being. They arrived early by caesarean section, surrounded by highly qualified specialists, nurses, two loving parents, four grandparents all of whom cared for and

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community to ensure that the importance of girls' education is supported; making home visits to intervene with households where girls may be kept at home to care for younger children while their brothers are educated; and providing training in business skills and life skills to teach girls about self-esteem and sexual autonomy.


Finally, the African grandmothers told us, in their own heartfelt words, what they thought it meant to be an orphan. Their grandchildren, they explained, can be described as 'orphans' not because they are abandoned or suffer from a lack of love, care and support — on the contrary, they know that their grandmothers struggle to provide for them every day — but because they are uncertain that their need for food, shelter, education, and clothing will be met.



"I would like to celebrate the lives of these grandmothers and I would like to thank Stephen and his foundation for giving us this opportunity to commit ourselves today. Like the rest of you I commit myself to the life of that child. I will turn every stone, I will move every mountain, I will climb every hill and I will walk every mile until that child attains self-actualization and until these grandmothers get the rest that they deserve." — Joy Phumaphi

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nurtured these two precious tiny girls. Would they have survived in Africa? I don't think so AND all the care was free. How can life depend on the luck of where one's spirit first emerges? In Africa, we learned there is often not even one aspirin to ease the passing of an HIV/AIDS infected person. The Grandmothers' Gathering educated, inspired and has motivated older women in Canada to unite, to connect and to help."

Lucia Mazibuko

Gogo Granny Outreach Project Alexandra Township, South Africa

Lucia wanted to "tell [the women at the Gathering] about myself, my family, my loss and my grandchildren and how many people I am left with. My support group helps me with my difficulties, but tell them what I've been through because of HIV/AIDS. I want grannies in Canada to organise grannies' groups who are going to help us in Africa. As grannies of Africa we know we have sisters here."

Lucia told us that when her first daughter died of AIDS in 1999 and then her second died in 2000, she was devastated. "I didn't know anything about AIDS. I just kept quiet. I just kept the kids inside. I didn't want to talk about it. I nearly lost



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my mind," she said. But then her grandson, Bongoni, who had been attending a bereavement group at the local clinic, got her to finally open up. He begged her, "Please talk about AIDS with us."

Lucia is 52 years old and lives in Alexandra Township in South Africa. She is a widow and was a mother to six children. She has lost two daughters to HIV/AIDS. After their deaths, Lucia assumed the care of her daughters' two HIV+ children, Bobo, who is now 9 years old, and Bongoni, who died of AIDS in 2004 at the age of 9. Lucia did not have the money for the antiretroviral drugs (ARVs), that her grandson needed. She became one of the first three grannies to join the Gogo Granny Outreach Project. Today she helps new members of the group, and she says that using her own experiences, she is able to counsel and support

them through their pain. She describes her life at home as a constant battle for survival. Her husband is dead and she lives in a two-room home with her grandson. Her only relief is the Gogo grannies, where she can talk, grieve and learn new skills, including gardening and sewing. All together, the members are raising 172 orphaned children. In Lucia's words, "I'm not educated, but I teach them, 'We'll deal with this together'."