



THE WAY FORWARD: AN OVERVIEW

“We now know we have sisters in this struggle;
unified, we will make change!”



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The final series of workshops focused on the way forward: advocacy and actions to be taken by both the African and the Canadian grandmothers. The closing sessions amounted to powerful statements of commitment and creativity — testaments to the expertise and wisdom of all present, and their determination to leave the Gathering having made a difference in the lives of Africa's grandmothers and the children in their care.

Over two days, the grandmothers discussed topics ranging from fundraising to networking, from providing basic needs at the local level to advocating for increased international commitment, to gaining recognition for the critical roles played by grandmothers the world over. They utilized dozens of creative approaches: story-telling and films that generated discussions and provided information, leading to empowerment and action; songs and dances that tran-

scended language barriers, giving room for mourning and time celebration; sharing models and providing specific examples of successful project approaches, fundraising efforts and lobbying techniques, and much more.

By popular demand, each workshop ended on a high note of mutual discovery, empathy and commitment to one another — across continents, cultures and regions. Two days of intense sharing and discussion left the grandmothers, in their final round of workshops, hugging, weeping, raising their voices together — sometimes in joyful unity and sometimes in anger over injustice — making deeply felt declarations of commitment, and feeling renewed hope and energy for the struggle ahead.

We can't possibly cover all of the thoughtful presentations. What follows is an overview of the terrific conversations that took place.

CHALLENGES TO THE WAY FORWARD: GRANDMOTHERS' PERSPECTIVES

- The need to have a voice in public fora — whether within their own communities or in parliament;
- Intolerance for the silencing of women and the particular invisibility of older women, which, in turn, has resulted in a global failure to recognize not only the contributions grandmothers can and do make, but the strength of their experience;
- Impatience with the many factors — ageism, sexism, poverty and the absence of the concept of an elder 'stateswoman' in African countries and Canada — that muffle the voices of grandmothers and keep their needs from finding their way onto the agendas of those responsible for addressing them.

Despite their awareness of all the impediments, none of the grandmothers were cowed. Instead, they saw power in their numbers and in their solidarity. As one Canadian quoted, "If you think you're too small to make a difference, try going to bed with a mosquito!" to which her African counterpart responded, "We now know we have sisters in this struggle; unified, we will make change." Margaret Mead was also quoted: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has."

KEY ISSUES

Issues of poverty, hunger, lack of shelter and health care that formed the backdrop for discussions throughout, fed into the advocacy and action portion of the programme.

Several workshops focused on women's human rights. The African grandmothers talked about how much education

and empowerment was needed. So many African grandmothers do not know their rights, and even when they do, they do not have the social, cultural or economic power to insist that their rights be enforced. And then, there is the enormous challenge of the lack of legal rights for women: lack of rights within marriage (which makes negotiating safer sex and refusing to engage in harmful practices next to impossible); the absence of property and inheritance rights (which often means that a baby boy has more rights to land and shelter than his mother or grandmother); the constant abrogation of the right to education for girls; and the inability to avail oneself of such basic human rights as a basic standard of healthcare and protection from abuse.

There was much discussion of how such gaps and abuses must be addressed, from empowering grandmothers through knowledge of their rights, to promoting legal and behaviour changes that will enforce those rights. There was an energetic discussion of how community-driven responses to human rights abuses can be effective, including participatory approaches, involving entire communities, in education and advocacy for women's human rights. Coordinators from the African projects talked about the need for funding for grassroots efforts around 'human rights literacy', and getting communities to recognize the human rights of grandmothers, women and girls, and work to make them a reality.

There was a sophisticated analysis of international instruments for the promotion of human rights, and all of the grandmothers acknowledged the critical role Canadian grandmothers could play in advocating for greater adherence to, and implementation of, international conventions and the role of the Canadian government in this process.



In this context, in the workshops which looked at health issues, participants recognized the need for enforcing international standards of health and universal access to healthcare, including nutrition, sanitation, education and treatment, in addition to adequate care and support for those affected by, or infected with HIV and AIDS. We heard that there was a lack of data collection around the health concerns of older women, which proves particularly important with regard to HIV/AIDS and its effects on grandmothers. We also heard that inadequate programmes and laws addressing stress, violence against women, poor nutrition and lack of healthcare (for older impoverished women, HIV-positive women and others) perpetuate the ongoing violation of grandmothers' rights to health. Many grassroots projects in Africa are addressing these issues — primarily through health education and home-

based care programmes — but their effectiveness is severely hampered by a lack of financial resources.

There was much talk of the importance and power of networks, across provincial borders in Canada and within African countries, between different African countries, and between Canadian and African grandmothers. We heard that these networks don't necessarily have to be formal; in fact, the grandmothers called upon the Stephen Lewis Foundation to help them keep one another apprised of what was being done in the follow-up to the Gathering, and to continue to foster their solidarity. The grandmothers remarked that they had come into the Gathering with various preconceived notions about what solidarity and unity mean. Through their interactions, they had deepened their understanding of what more it



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could mean, and the role each could play in improving the quality of life for Africa's grandmothers — and, in the process, for Canadian grandmothers as well. There were a series of workshops on fundraising and awareness-raising. Much concrete information was shared during these sessions and copious notes were taken by all.

Many of the grandmothers from Canada voiced a preference for either fundraising or advocacy as a strategic way of assisting African grandmothers. Some groups concluded that these were not mutually exclusive strategies, but mutual reinforcing ones. Many of the facilitators talked of the efficacy of engaging in both activities, stressing that awareness-raising is a critical component to fundraising, and that fundraising is needed to respond to the African grandmothers' clear articulation of their needs for

funds to help solve their predicaments. More than one facilitator discussed the need to undertake significant awareness-raising before trying to do fundraising, and encouraged grandmothers in Canada to be open to publicity. We heard that it helps to be realistic about how much money you can raise, and at the same time, grannies were encouraged not to shy away from large fundraising goals. Everyone agreed that it was effective to stay close to one's roots, raise awareness and fundraise locally, and use the Gathering as a springboard for more ambitious undertakings, including working across provinces.

Several grandmothers talked about their initial wariness of fundraising, and how they discovered that it could be fun, joking that if someone asked them to join a fundraising group, they'd say no, but if asked to get together, have a good

time, build skills and support the African grandmothers, they would respond with an unqualified 'yes!' Some groups discussed their specific past activities, many of which brought creative ideas and the arts together with fundraising activities (selling crafts, holding concerts, etc.) while at the same time, raising an enormous amount of awareness in their communities. Everyone agreed that they found the experiences empowering; there was increased respect for their skills and they felt better understood in their communities and families and among friends.

We heard very specific and concrete advice: develop key messages; make an event plan (short term and long term); foster relationships with local and national press; identify allies in the community and pursue them; strive for diversity in your group (across experiences, cultures, ages, etc.); don't hesitate to mobilize, act, and inspire others; and never doubt that your commitment, empathy and determination will do just that! One group advocated for starting small and letting the group take on a life of its own; another spoke of many small

groups uniting and networking through a larger umbrella group.

The need to raise funds was stressed over and over. One particularly successful fundraising group talked about how they had started out 'allergic' to fundraising, and quickly realized that they didn't have to do it all on their own; they could mobilize and motivate other sectors in their community and be much more effective.

The York Region Committee in Support of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, a group of committed individuals who have raised almost a million dollars in support of grassroots projects working on AIDS in Africa spoke of how they set up a speakers' bureau, met with town councils, got their school board involved in raising awareness of AIDS in Africa, held 'Breakfasts of Champions' in different communities (faith communities, business, local government, etc.) and had 'patrons' and locally-respected guest speakers addressing the issues. As a result of this effort, grandmothers' groups have sprung up throughout the area. Still others emphasized: Get the word

GRANNIES' STORIES

Alicia Mdaka Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS (GAPA) Cape Town, South Africa

Alicia Mdaka is described by her peers as one of the dynamic founders of GAPA and known affectionately as 'Mrs. Mdaka'. Now 66, she was a mother to eight children and grandmother to seven. In 1999, Mrs. Mdaka lost a daughter, followed by an 8-month-old granddaughter in 2000. In 2001, her home burned down with all her belongings inside, and that same year, a second daughter died. Two of her sons suffer from mental illnesses. With all of this hardship, Mrs. Mdaka had suicidal thoughts. One of her daughters has been living with HIV for 11 years and encouraged her to attend a support group. Mrs. Mdaka found an enormous

amount of support with other grandmothers there, and they decided to start a group called Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS. The group put their money together to get her a sewing machine to replace the one she lost in her house fire, and she uses it to bring in income. "It is time for us grannies to wake up," she says. "Together we can do it. Unity is strength! I am now a community leader!"

She lost two of her sons through violence in South Africa in the last two years, but has maintained her strength through the network of grandmothers.

out. Don't let people forget. Always include an educational component to your meetings and events. Get your name out there. Engage in different kinds of initiatives, such as vigils and partnerships with schools; target important dates such as World AIDS Day (December 1st) and Grandparents Day: the funds will flow, and so will attention within the community. Finally, there was much excitement from several Canadian groups about inter-generational work — engaging young people through schools and joint awareness-raising and fundraising activities — to mirror the inter-generational support that grandmothers provide when they care for their grandchildren.

Awareness-raising was also energetically discussed in the context of advocacy at the national level. Both African and Canadian grandmothers talked about the importance of lobbying governments to change policies; to recognize the needs and rights of African grandmothers; to make their issues more visible, and to include them in research and political solutions. Canadian grandmothers spoke urgently of the need to push



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GRANNIES' STORIES

Sharon Swanson Perth, Ontario

I am a 64-year-old married woman from Perth, Ontario; a proud mother of four and grandmother of six.

Unlike many African grandmothers, I have never gone to bed at night worrying about how I might find food for my grandchildren. I have never wondered how I might find the money to pay for school fees so they might learn to read and write. Nor have I ever watched any member of my family suffer with dreadful pain, knowing that neither medical help nor medicine was available. I have seen my children through illness and sad times but I have never had to bury my child. I have lived a privileged life.

Growing up in Vancouver East, I was frequently reminded by

my parents (who had very little) of how lucky I was, how it was my responsibility to help those who were not so fortunate. I felt then that they just didn't get it, but over the years, various experiences helped me to see things from their perspective.

The Tsunami tragedy helped me to appreciate that I was a part of the global community, not just a resident of Canada. I felt that we were all in this terrible tragedy together — responsible for each other and the planet. Listening later to Stephen Lewis deliver the Massey Lecture series provided me with the opportunity I needed. I headed eagerly to the gathering of grannies in Toronto to learn more. It was a moving, inspiring and sad time. I wanted to support the grannies in Africa in some way. I knew that family and friends were all busy and already committed to other important endeavours in their communities. Hoping that they could find a little time, energy and money to support the courageous grannies

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governments to meet the commitment, made long ago, to allocate 0.7 % of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to foreign aid.

An African grandmother, facilitating a workshop on the silencing of grandmothers said, "There must be relentless advocacy for government programmes and change." She stressed that African grandmothers are not silent because they have nothing to say, but because their culture silences them. They must be supported to speak and be heard.

Canadian grandmothers agreed that lobbying gives women a voice. They talked about using all at their command — networking through the internet, calling MPs, calling for face-to-face meetings, letter-writing, and targeting their actions to ensure maximum effectiveness. They noted that one can't hold governments accountable alone. AIDS in Africa has a woman's face — so grandmothers are logical advocates.

GRANNIES' STORIES (cont'd from p.57)

in Africa and believing that together we could make a contribution, I sent out a letter asking for their help:

[an excerpt from Sharon's letter]:

"These 100 grannies are heroines. In the small workshops, they told their stories. I could hardly bear to listen at times. Small, frail, and wizened elderly women, robust, young, exhausted women repeated the same story:

"I had 6 children, only 2 are left now and one is ill."

"I have seven grandchildren to care for. They are good children but I cry at night when I have no food for them."

"Every day I work in the garden, sometimes I have potatoes and beans to sell but usually not."

It went on and on. The goal was to help Canadian women understand what it was like to bury your children, and then in your 60's and 70's, have to start again to do child rear-

ing. I know I was constantly wiping tears from my eyes as they stopped in their stories to weep. And yet, it was not a sad time. Believe it or not, they always had something positive to say. They always had a smile when they got themselves composed and they broke into song and dance at a moment's notice. They were truly unbelievable. I do not have words to describe them to you.

Can you imagine what it must be like to bury all your children, care for your grandchildren and also, in many cases, try to take care of yourself (many became HIV-positive themselves while nursing their dying children because they did not understand how it was transferred)? In my wildest dreams, I cannot imagine a worse situation. And yet their courage, their humility, their backbreaking work and their loving, positive energy and smiles are keeping their countries marching forward to conquer this monster."