



# INTRODUCTION

***This is a tribute to Grandmothers from Africa, who have humbled us with their super-human responses to unbearable sorrow and hardship, and to Grandmothers from Canada, who have inspired us by reaching across continents to lighten the loads of strangers.***

Since the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF) was started in March 2003, thousands of individuals have sent donations of all sizes, allowing us so far to fund over 170 projects in 14 of the most HIV-affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In direct partnership with struggling grassroots and community-based organizations, we can now support women and children orphaned by AIDS and ameliorate some of the pain suffered by people whose modest dreams have been shattered by this pandemic.

In the last year, though, whenever my father, Stephen Lewis, returned from a trip to Africa, he seemed especially haunted by two impressions: first, of the unnatural paucity of young women everywhere, and second, by the droves of older women, wearied and worried by loss and poverty and the back-breaking work of caring for their orphaned grandchildren. At the same time, as we poured through incoming grant proposals at the Foundation, we noticed mounting references to caregivers and their special needs — and when we probed further, our suspicions were confirmed. Africa’s rural villages and urban slums were teeming with older women who had nursed and then buried their own children, had been pummeled by poverty and despair, and had somehow found the courage and energy to become parents all over again — this time, to a generation of bereft, confused youngsters. One extended family at a time, a continent in tatters was being stitched back together by grandmothers.

We investigated further and discovered that, although a trend had clearly exploded into a phenomenon, very few organizations were paying attention. HelpAge International was one notable exception, and we drew heavily on their information and expertise as an idea took form. Here and there in Africa, we were learning, grandmothers struggling with similar hardships had begun to meet regularly to support and sustain one another. Meanwhile, a growing number of empathetic Canadians — women whose hearts had been touched because they knew firsthand of grandmotherly love and grandmotherly challenges — had also formed groups with the aim of sending help to their unknown sisters across the Atlantic. The Canadian grandmothers were eager to find out what kind of help was most needed, and the African grandmothers barely had the time or resources to attend their support group meetings, much less to guide potential benefactors overseas. A need was obvious. A movement seemed possible.

We wanted to give African grandmothers a forum to speak about their lives, voice their concerns and help inform the international support that can and must come. We wanted to give Canadian grandmothers the chance to hear that testimony in person. And we wanted to offer both groups the opportunity to become acquainted, to pool their knowledge and wisdom, influence, creativity, insights, commitment and determination, and just possibly to plot an end to the suffering together.

Thus was born the idea of the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Gathering. On the eve of the XVI International AIDS Conference, 100 African grandmothers affiliated with Foundation-supported projects arrived in Toronto, with their project facilitators, from Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and were met by 200 self-funded grandmothers from across Canada. They had come to take part in over 40 workshops on topics ranging from grief to traditional songs, orphan care, depression and fundraising — each one designed, selected and run by the grandmothers themselves — as well as to sing, dance and try new foods, share photographs of their loved ones, cry, laugh, hug, pledge and promise, shake their fists, clench their teeth, talk to journalists, pose for pictures, and march through the streets of Toronto. They had come to speak, and listen, and start a movement.

This report attempts to capture what occurred during two and a half intensely emotional, energized, exhausting, exhilarating days. We haven't tried to produce an exhaustive account of the situation of Africa's grandmothers or to draw definitive conclusions here. We have tried instead to bear witness.

The work of countless committed friends and supporters in Canada and Africa made the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Gathering a success beyond our wildest imaginings, covered in hundreds of newspaper, TV and radio stories throughout Canada and the world, from the New York Times to London's Guardian, CNN, Reuters and the BBC. On the eve of International Women's Day 2006, when we launched the campaign, there were just a few grandmothers' groups in Canada. By the time of the Gathering there were almost 50, and today there are over 140 active groups — with that number growing steadily. Grandmothers' groups in Africa are also proliferating, and making themselves audible and visible as never before. Their newfound support is allowing growing numbers of granny groups to generate income, cope with loss and grief, organize, lobby for access to treatment for their grandchildren and themselves, and change national policies. The following pages demonstrate how, out of Africa's courage and Canada's generosity, a Grandmothers' Movement was born. We are honoured to be part of it.



Ilana Landsberg-Lewis, Executive Director

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