They marched in the thousands, grandmothers from Ethiopia, gogos from South Africa, nya nyas from Kenya, sho shos from Zambia, nanas from Namibia, grannies from 13 African countries, marching in solidarity through Manzini, Swaziland, on May 8, 2010, in the first-ever International Grandmothers’ Gathering on African soil – organized jointly by the Stephen Lewis Foundation and SWAPOL (Swaziland Positive Living). Striding right alongside were 42 Canadian grandmothers, members of the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, raising funds and awareness about the AIDS pandemic and the role played by African grandmothers.

"Phezu Kom Khono!" "Raise your arms, women!" rang out over a loudspeaker, and thousands of voices, African and Canadian, took up the call. The voice on the speaker was that of SWAPOL’s founder, Siphiwe Hlope, the indomitable organizer of the gathering. In the country with the highest percentage of people living with HIV/AIDS, SWAPOL works tirelessly to support grandmothers raising their orphaned grandchildren and organizes myriad counselling, prevention and care initiatives.

Bent over with arthritis and years of back-breaking work, older grannies leaned on younger arms to struggle up the hill from the centre of Manzini to the Mavuso Trade Centre. They could have ridden in one of the vans provided, but "No," they said, "I’m here to WALK!"

Grandmothers held hands as they shared their stories; the heartbreak seems to have no end. Yet here they are, not only surviving, but sustaining their remaining family and holding together whole communities. They are the backbone of orphan care, the heart of the continent’s response to HIV/AIDS.

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The Grandmothers’ Gathering – and the Grandmothers’ Movement both in Canada and Africa – is a clarion call to the world to pay heed to the enormity of the tasks African grandmothers must perform on a daily basis, the sophisticated and effective solutions they have developed, and the tremendous support they draw from collaborating with other women.

“We stand here today battered,” begins the Manzini Statement, their call to action, “but not broken. We are resilient and stand unwavering in our resolve to move beyond basic survival to forge a vibrant future for the orphans and grandmothers of Africa… We must have the resources to build our own capacity to raise healthy families and assist one another. We call for more training in critical areas such as home-based care, HIV/AIDS education, on parenting orphaned children and adolescents, health care, literacy and financial management.” And they insist on urgent action in three priority areas: violence against grandmothers, meaningful support, and laws to ensure the safety and rights of grandmothers and their grandchildren.

At the end of the walk, African and Canadian grandmothers stood side by side, “We are strong, we are visionary, we have faith and we are not alone. Together we will turn the tide of AIDS,” they said in solidarity.

The Canadians are transformed. They had come to Africa filled with excitement to meet the people whose far-away lives had become intertwined with their own, and for whom they have raised $12 million in five years. They arrived committed to the cause; they left fiery advocates for the powerful, resilient African women, sisters united in an unbreakable bond.

In the year since the African Grandmothers’ Gathering in Swaziland, women across the continent have been mobilizing in their communities. Here are just a few updates we’ve received from the delegates:

At PEFO’s February launch of their ‘Care for the Care Givers’ Campaign in Jinja, Uganda, twenty grandmothers participated in a fashion show and beauty pageant. The goal: to highlight their resourcefulness and give them a public platform to articulate the issues that affect grandmothers. More than 1,000 people attended. Watch a clip online at: www.youtube.com/user/ntvuganda (search for ‘PEFO’).

The representatives at the Swazi Gathering from the Botswana Retired Nurses Society (BORNUS) were so inspired that they started a grandmother group in June 2010. Many of the 14 active members have grandchildren at the crèche or children who are clients at the day hospice. The group meets regularly to talk and make and sell items to generate income. Two other communities have expressed an interest in starting groups of their own. Kgomotso, the group’s chair, says “the group is like a clinic for us. It is where we assist one another.”

GRANDMOTHERS TO GRANDMOTHERS CAMPAIGN: 5 YEARS OF SOLIDARITY

2006
Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign Launch & Grandmothers’ Gathering, Toronto

2007
African Grandmothers visit Canada
“As a result of the Swaziland meeting, grannies are very committed to continue coming together to share knowledge and challenges,” wrote Faustine Ngarambe, Executive Director of St. Francis Health Care Services in Uganda. “They want to engage the policy makers and be included in government programmes. This is the beginning of the grandmothers’ movement that is going to advocate for grannies and orphans and vulnerable children. With the support from the SLF we believe we shall be there.”

For the grandmothers from Kimara Peers in Tanzania, the experience of listening to other grandmothers in Swaziland, “made us feel we are not alone. Scenarios like those of property grabbing were apparent in the Swazi community just like they are in Tanzania.” The Kimara Peers grandmothers were interested in the business models shared by Ugandan and Rwandan grandmothers at the Gathering, and have since started a similar programme.

At Hillcrest AIDS Centre Trust in South Africa, two new granny groups have formed since the Gathering. Hillcrest now reaches 502 grandmothers in 15 groups and offers a granny exercise programme, unique because “traditionally grannies in Zulu culture are just supposed to ‘sit under a tree,’” says Julie Hornby, Hillcrest’s Executive Director. Grannies report feeling “more proactive and emotionally stronger to take on the challenges of relating to their grandchildren and handling the stresses of financial hardship.”

The delegates from Ethiopia’s Developing the Family Together (DFT) were heartened to learn that they are not alone in struggling to care for their orphaned grandchildren. The grandmothers have started a fundraising committee, and 35 grandmother-headed households are receiving food, clothing and cleaning materials. DFT has also expanded their services to a nearby region where no support for grannies and orphans existed.

For grandmothers from Sophiatown CPS in Johannesburg, South Africa, the Gathering was an amazing experience of solidarity. After the Swazi Gathering, the Thandanani Support Group participated in a three-day retreat of healing ceremonies and worked to identify positive messages to take back to their communities.

The two grandmothers who attended the Gathering from Pendeza Africa (PENAF) in Kenya gained widespread media attention and used the opportunity to spread the word that “the role of the granny as caretaker is in the whole of Africa.” PENAF has recently started a health insurance programme for grandmothers. For those who have no family members to cover their medical bills, the organization has arranged with the local dispensary to have them treated and given medication.

Following the Gathering, the grandmothers of MKUKI in Tanzania came together to discuss how to set up small groups and earn money through income-generating activities. They started clusters, elected leaders, and each group decided on the kind of activity they want to run, how they will operate it, where they will sell their goods, and how they will keep their records and budgets in order.

When the grandmother delegates from Ekupholeni in South Africa reported their experiences in Swaziland to their fellow group members, they emphasized the importance of earning one’s own income, as they learned that this is the norm for grandmothers all over Africa, where social grants do not exist.
UPDATE FROM SWAZILAND

In Swaziland, the African Grandmothers’ Gathering has had a significant impact. In February 2011, the government introduced free health services for grandmothers in all hospitals. The Deputy Prime Minister’s Office has been designated to oversee issues that concern grandmothers, which SWAPOL Director Siphiwe Hlope calls “a huge achievement.”

More than 6,000 grandmothers have obtained bank accounts, and are receiving stipends on a monthly basis. SWAPOL grandmothers are also taking on income-generating activities and applying many of the ideas learned at the Gathering.

To read the Manzini Statement — the grandmothers’ call to action — please visit the ‘Grandmothers Campaign Resources’ section of our website.

This spring, grandmothers from across Canada are organizing the "Stride to Turn the Tide," a national walk in support of Africa’s courageous and resilient grandmothers and the children in their care. Canadian grandmothers, along with their families and friends, are organizing walks in communities throughout Canada on weekends from May 14th — June 12th, 2011, and they would love for you to join them.

To start a walk, join a walk or donate to a grandmother group walking near you, please visit: www.grandmotherscampaign.org.