

## Grandmothers to grandmothers: Thousands march in Eswatini



Siphewe Hlophe, organizer of the first African Grandmothers' Gathering and March, cheers on her fellow grandmothers in Manzini, Eswatini. (Ricki Horowitz)

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, Eswatini, in the first-ever International Grandmothers' Gathering on African soil. Striding out right alongside the African grandmothers were 42 Canadian grandmothers, members of the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign; I was amongst them, and was forever changed by the experience.

"Phezu Kom Khono!" rang out over a loudspeaker, and thousands of voices, African and Canadian, took up the call. "Raise your arms, women!" called Siphewe Hlophe, head of SWAPOL (Swaziland Positive Living). Described as a "force of nature" by Stephen Lewis, Siphewe was the indomitable organizer of the gathering. In a country with the highest percentage of people living with HIV and AIDS, (a country that has since changed its name to Eswatini), SWAPOL works tirelessly to support grandmothers raising their orphaned grandchildren hammer home the message of prevention, and organize myriad counseling and care initiatives.

Songs and chants broke out spontaneously along the route, as strong women's voices rose

in call and response. Bent over with arthritis and years of back-breaking work, older grannies leaned on younger arms to struggle up the hill. They could have ridden in one of the vans provided, but "No," they said, "I'm here to WALK!" Buoyed by the harmonies swelling around me rich as Ladysmith Black Mombasa, I linked white arms with black arms, and we strode up the hill, together.

They'd spoken of the enormity of the challenges they face on a daily basis. "I had seven children; now, only one." "My daughter supported me; what work can I find to raise her children?" "When my husband died, my in-laws took my house." Yet here they were, not only surviving, but sustaining their remaining family and holding together whole communities. They described the solutions they've invented out of desperate need, the tremendous support they draw from collaborating with other women. They clearly identified their immediate and long-term needs, which were summarized in a call to action, the Manzini Statement.

"We stand here today battered," it begins, "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." The demands begin with economic independence, nutritious food and decent housing; include ongoing quality education and conclude with a richer quality of life for them all.

The grandmothers do not want continuous handouts, nor do they want pity from the developed world. Their insistence on integrity and autonomy is clear: "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 and AIDS education, on parenting orphaned children and adolescents, health care, literacy and financial management."

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 and committed to turn the tide of AIDS. "We are strong, we are visionary, we have faith and we are not alone," we said in solidarity.

As we left our African sisters behind in Manzini, tear-streaked faces and endless hugs testified to the depth of our commitment to our new mission. We had come to Africa filled with excitement to meet the women whose far-away lives we had read of in story after story. Now, here, the stories from Africa became real African women: powerful, resilient African women who united with us in an unbreakable bond.

We Canadians were transformed. We arrived in Manzini committed to the cause, we left fiery advocates for the real women we had hugged, marched beside, promised to support. We came home to raise a storm of protest across the country that cannot be ignored. HIV and AIDS is not just Africa's problem, the response must be global;

African grandmothers must have the resources they need to turn the tide of HIV and AIDS. That message resonates even more urgently today.

“Phezu com khona! Raise your arms, women!”