

## The South African Grandmothers Gathering in Durban - Never silent



Let's time travel to Durban, on South Africa's east coast, in the year 2016. Imagine ourselves alongside a throng of grandmothers singing and dancing their way into a crowded conference hall for the 2016 International AIDS Conference. One poster we pass by acknowledges the first Conference in Atlanta Georgia in 1985. The caption - 'SILENCE = DEATH' was shouted by AIDS activists in front of 2,000 gathered scientists. There are 2,000 grandmothers here today to deliver their message to the international community – *"You have overlooked us for far too long! Remember: Nothing About Us, Without Us!"*

Mama Darlina Tyawana, wearing a brightly coloured t-shirt with the powerful Grandmothers Gathering logo – two fists clasped together in solidarity and a third raised defiantly in the air – takes the stage while International AIDS Conference Co-Chairs Chris Beyrer and Olive Shisana look on. She speaks about concerns of grandmothers tasked with raising a whole generation of orphaned children: food security; lack of training; long walks to clinics where they wait only to be told that there is no medication. "Violence is a constant threat, whether it is rape and assault on our bodies, or physical abuse and intimidation from family members and loan sharks

who are after our small savings." She demands that government help nurture these children and youth, who will lead Africa out of the AIDS pandemic. We are among proud Canadian Grandmothers bearing witness. South African Grandmothers around us raise signs demanding that their human rights be recognized and their voices be heard. The collective sound of their voices – raised in song and indignation – is unignorable. Finally, we burst with pride when Mama Darlina Tyawana extends special thanks to members of the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign, and of Canada's Labour Union Movement. She presents an unsuspecting government official with a statement prepared by South African grandmothers.

**Part of Statement** (read the entire statement [here](#) or on pages 276-77 of *Powered by Love*, or [watch Mama Darlina deliver it here](#).)

*For years, we have struggled to raise our grandchildren, and hold together our families and communities. We came together in groups, supported by our community-based organizations, and found strength in unity. Our love has transformed the devastation of AIDS. We thought we were doing our duty. We knew we were demonstrating our love. In fact, we were raising a nation.*

*And we are not alone. Grandmothers across Africa have been gathering for the past 10 years. From Canada, to Swaziland, to Uganda and now in South Africa, we have moved from mourning to a movement. We have been doing our part, and have become experts on how to survive and thrive in the midst of the AIDS pandemic. It takes so much more than ARVs to resurrect a community. South African grandmothers spent two days together in Durban as the world prepares for the International AIDS Conference, 2016. Today we come to insist that we receive increased support and to have our expertise counted.*

*Our country created protections for grandmothers. There are pensions, foster care grants and stipends for home-based care workers. To see these measures put in place to protect our rights, gave us hope that our burden would be less heavy. But they are not working. When it can take years for a foster care grant to be processed, when grandmothers have to travel long distances to visit government offices who turn them away again and again, when pensions are hopelessly inadequate and don't start until 60, then we are dealing with a system that is in desperate need of change.*

*As older women, we face challenges that are still ignored. The health system is failing us and HIV+ grandmothers have special needs that are not met. We wait in lines at clinics for hours, meet with healthcare workers who are often uncaring and do not have the medication we need. Violence is a constant threat, whether it is rape and assault on our bodies, or physical abuse and intimidation from family members and loan sharks who are after our small savings. We suffer without protection. And when we look to Parliament, there is no one who stands for our interests, no one who speaks for us. We are pillars of our communities, and we live our lives as examples, we are caring for so many children, but who is caring for us?*

*We will continue to struggle, and we will not give up the fight against HIV & AIDS. We will never give up because this grandmothers movement is powered by love. Amandla!*

Prepared by Peg Frank of the VG4A Education Working Group  
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and attended by a small number of Canadian grandmothers.

