

# TORONTO STATEMENT

*The Toronto Statement, released on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006, was both a summary of discussions held over the course of the Grandmothers' Gathering, and a view to the future: "the dawn of the grandmothers' movement."*

AS GRANDMOTHERS FROM AFRICA AND CANADA, we were drawn together in Toronto for three days in August 2006 by our similarities: our deep love and undying devotion to our children and grandchildren; our profound concern about the havoc that HIV/AIDS has inflicted on the continent of Africa, and in particular on its women and its children; and our understanding that we have within us everything needed to surmount seemingly insurmountable obstacles. We are strong, we are determined, we are resourceful, we are creative, we are resilient, and we have the wisdom that comes with age and experience.

From one side of the globe we are African grandmothers from Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique; from Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa and Swaziland; from Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, raising the children of our beloved late sons and daughters. We come to the end of this historic gathering filled with emotions: we are grateful for the chance we have been given – at long last – to make our voices heard. We are relieved to have had an opportunity to tell our stories, to share our experiences, to describe our hardships and our pain, to share the anxieties and express the sadness that descended on us late in our lives, and to receive respectful acknowledgement for the ongoing grief that scars our daily existence.

Each of our stories is different, each of our experiences is unique, and yet we are here as representatives of countless women who share in our tragedy: for every grandmother here today, there are fifty, sixty, seventy thousand at home. We have needs today, needs for the short-term and needs that will never go away. It is our solemn duty to the millions of grandmothers whose voices have never been heard that gives us the courage

to raise those needs to demands – on their behalf, and on behalf of the children in their care.

Today, we demand the ear of the powerful: these words are for the conference organizers and the 25,000 delegates assembled at the 16<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference; for its host government, Canada; for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria; and for the United Nations. Grandmothers are worth listening to. We demand to be heard.

In the short-term, we do not need a great deal, but we do need enough: enough to safeguard the health of our grandchildren and of ourselves; enough to put food in their mouths, roofs over their heads and clothes on their backs; enough to place them in school and keep them there long enough to secure their futures. For ourselves, we need training, because the skills we learned while raising our children did not prepare us for parenting grandchildren who are bereaved, impoverished, confused and extremely vulnerable. We need the assurance that when help is sent, it goes beyond the cities and reaches the villages where we live. In the long term, we need security. We need regular incomes and economic independence in order to erase forever our constant worry about how and whether our families will survive.

We grandmothers deserve hope. Our children, like all children, deserve a future. We will not raise children for the grave.

From another side of the globe, we are Canadian grandmothers, arriving at the end of our gathering enlightened, resolved, humbled and united with our African sisters. We stand firm in our commitment to give of ourselves because we have so much to give – so many resources, such a relative abundance of time, so much access, so much influence, so much empathy and compassion. We recognize that our African friends are consumed each day with the business of surviving, and so we have offered – and they have accepted – the loan of our voices. We pledge to act as their ambassadors, raising the volume on their long-suppressed stories until they are heard, understood and acted upon. We promise to apply pressure on governments, on religious leaders, and on the international community. We are committed to mobilizing funds, and recruiting more ambassadors among

our sisters in Canada. We are dedicated to finding ways to make it clear that Africa's grandmothers hold a place in our hearts and in our thoughts not just today, but each day. We are acutely conscious of the enormous debt owed to a generation of women who spent their youth freeing Africa, their middle age reviving it, and their older lives sustaining it. We will not rest until they can rest.

Africans and Canadians alike, we arrived at our grandmothers' gathering with high expectations, but also with nagging apprehensions. We worried that the grief - our own and our sisters' - would be overwhelming. We harboured fears that the language barriers would separate us. We Canadian grandmothers worried that our capacity to help might be reduced to fundraising alone; we African grandmothers worried that our dire straits might

cast us as victims rather than heroes. But we were motivated to make the trip by the special love that every grandmother knows, and we were emboldened to face our fears by the wisdom of our years. Our courage paid off. The age-old African ways of speaking without words broke down our communications barriers. We gestured and nodded. And we sang. We danced. We drummed. We laughed and clapped and wept and hugged. Through our new discovery - grandmother to grandmother solidarity - we carried ourselves and one another through the grief to where we are this morning.

May this be the dawn of the grandmothers' movement.

TORONTO, CANADA  
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