



# Older Women Count!

## Understanding and Supporting the Rights of Older Women/Grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa

### Executive Summary

#### Introduction

The Grandmothers Advocacy Network (GRAN) is a cross-Canada network of volunteers advocating at local, national and international levels. GRAN engages Canadian and international support for policies and programs that will address the needs of African grandmothers as they strive to sustain their families and communities in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Participants in GRAN identified the need and desirability of keeping a strong focus on older women as part of how we advocate our issues. This paper was developed to help us (and others) better understand the concerns, strengths, rights and situations of older women in sub-Saharan Africa by:

- Reviewing relevant, up-to-date-information on older women in sub-Saharan Africa as it relates to GRAN's work and current issues
- Providing the groundwork and rationale for the better integration of older women in advocating a feminist agenda that respects the rights of all ages
- Suggesting actions to protect and enhance the rights of older women and the vulnerable young people in their care.

The report focuses on sub-Saharan Africa, where the HIV/AIDS pandemic is most prevalent and persistent. However, it is important to note that there are great variations between and among countries in the region. For example, older women living in very low-income countries or countries in conflict will have different life circumstances than those living in low- and middle-income countries with stable governments in place. There are also differences and inequities within countries themselves (for example between rural and urban areas).



## Older Women Count! Invisibility, Inequality and Discrimination

Older women face double or triple jeopardy. In sub-Saharan Africa, older women/grandmothers are raising millions of young people orphaned by AIDS. With courage, persistence and love they are leading their communities and advocating for their rights.

Yet these older women face discrimination associated with both age and gender. Other factors can exacerbate this discrimination, including disability, low-income status, the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, and membership in certain communities, e.g. Indigenous peoples, minority ethnic, tribal and racial groups, refugees and migrants, and the LGBTTTQ+ community. Like older women all over the world, their contributions and needs often remain invisible to decision-makers, governments and international agencies. Addressing inequality and achieving gender equality (Sustainable Development Goal [SDG] 5) is at the heart of a feminist approach. Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.

In low-income countries, the challenge of invisibility is exacerbated by a lack of data. For example, very little or no data is collected on HIV status and the experience of violence for women after the age 49. In other cases (such as levels of education and literacy) data is extremely limited and/or not disaggregated by age and sex. Older women are denied basic services and protection of their rights because they are absent from official records and are invisible to policy-makers and organizations providing development assistance.

New ways of collecting information are required in addition to extending age cut-offs beyond age 49 (to include age groupings from 50 to 60, 60 to 75 and age 75 and above). Current targets in virtually all the SDGs need amendments if we are to understand inequality among older people.

### How Old is “Older?”

Statistics Canada defines “seniors” as aged 65 and above. The UN generally refers to older people as age 60 and above. However, in sub-Saharan Africa it is not uncommon for women in their 40s and 50s to be grandmothers and/or to experience the physical declines associated with older age resulting from early and mid-life deprivations. In many countries, policies and programs distinguish older women as those who are past the reproductive stage of life (age 50). It is important to view aging and “older” as a culmination of life experiences and transitions, and to consider how aging women themselves perceive being “older” in various communities and cultures.

Older women are not a homogeneous group. Life is very different at age 50, 60, 70 and 80, and is affected by culture, traditions, education, living conditions, social support,



values and earlier life experiences. Aging may also constitute a continuum of independence, interdependence and dependence. This ranges from older women who are essentially independent, to those who require and give assistance in their day-to-day lives, to those who are dependent on others for support and care. Grandmothers in Africa are dealing with all of these stages as they support themselves and each other, and care for young people, middle-aged people who are ill, and older people in their families and communities.

## A Framework for Action

The framework for action suggests the mainstreaming of both an **age- and gender-responsive lens** by decision-makers and other influencers when considering policies, programs, practices and treaties, both international and domestic. This means asking a fundamental question: How will this policy, funding program, legislation, communication, etc. affect different genders and girls and women of differing ages, with a clear inclusion of and emphasis on older women?



This gender and age-sensitive lens applies a feminist approach which observes gender in its relation to power, both at the level of face-to-face interaction and the social structure at large.

It takes into account three conceptual foundations for policy making, strategic planning and campaigns:

- **A Life-course Approach** understands aging and cumulative disadvantage as a process that spans the entire lifespan, and provides supportive policies and activities at key transition points in a woman's life. Examples of life-course events after the reproductive stage of life that affect women's well-being in older age include: caregiving responsibilities associated with grandmothing and looking after community members who are sick; domestic violence, which may begin in childhood, continue in marriage and is a common form of elder abuse; widowhood, which commonly leads to a loss of income and property; cultural traditions and other barriers that limit access to health care in older age; and a lack of end-of-life care and support. Intergenerational solidarity and respect between generations is an essential part of a life-course approach.
- **Global Sustainable Development (GSD)** describes the pursuit of a stable, inclusive, healthy and thriving global society that lives within nature's means and provides an adequate resource base for future generations. A GSD approach is committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to "leaving no-one behind". While grandmothers and older women in Africa are the backbone of



development, they are often left behind and/or left out of development policies and initiatives.

- **Human Rights** are inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, gender, age, ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. A human rights approach promotes and protects international human rights standards. It seeks to analyze inequalities and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that hurt people and impede development progress.

## Five Pillars for Action

**Pillar 1: Education and Lifelong Learning:** Older women are the most likely to have had limited or no access to education growing up. Their right to lifelong learning and adult education is often ignored or denied.

**Pillar 2: Health:** Older women may not have access to required medicines and age-friendly health and social care (including support for preventing, treating and caring for grandmothers and the children in their care who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS). Many do not have the basic resources required for health (e.g. nutritious food, clean water and adequate, safe housing).

**Pillar 3: Freedom from Violence:** Many older women are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological violence, verbal and financial abuse, abusive traditional practices (such as wife inheritance) and neglect.

**Pillar 4: Economic Security/Social Protection:** Older women are often denied their rights to decent work, life beyond poverty, and to property and inheritances that rightfully belong to them. Very few have access to social pensions and other social protection measures such as credit schemes and affordable healthcare. Their essential caregiving role is not supported.

**Pillar 5: Human Rights, Equality and Full Participation:** Invisibility to policy-makers, a lifetime of gender inequality and ageism is behind much of older women's struggle to enjoy their rights and fully participate in elected assemblies, decision-making bodies and the development process.



## Opportunities for Action

How can we protect and enhance the rights of older women?

1. Take a life-course, feminist and rights-based approach that emphasizes older women/grandmothers and supports intergenerational solidarity.
2. Count older women in. Ensure that all data collection (e.g. in HIV/AIDS and in violence against women) include people over the age of 50, and that all data are disaggregated by sex and age.
3. Recognize that older women/grandmothers are key agents of development. Support their crucial roles as caregivers, heads of households, community leaders and contributors to the economy. Directly support the community organizations and grandmother groups that are leading the way and advocating for their rights.
4. Press for gender equality at all ages and the inclusion of support for the rights of older women in international and domestic policies and programs.
5. Monitor and comment on Canada's budget for international development assistance and the country's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals on poverty, education, health, and equality, especially as it relates to older women.
6. Leave no-one behind. Provide a strong focus on sub-Saharan Africa with deliberate attention to the often unrecognized, uncounted and mostly unpaid grandmothers and older women who are caring for the next generation of African youth and sustaining their communities with little or no assistance.
7. Support older women's right to non-violence throughout the life-course. Advocate for the enactment and enforcement of laws to prohibit domestic violence, elder abuse, rape and sexual violence in war and displacement camps, land grabbing, and harmful practices such as early marriage and wife inheritance.
8. Support older women's right to economic and social security through policies and programs that address poverty, and provide pensions, credit schemes, development grants, decent work (for those who are able to work), support for community groups, and protection from theft and land grabbing. Enact and enforce laws that ensure rightful inheritance practices.
9. Support older women's right to education and lifelong learning. Press our government to increase Canada's contribution to international education (that is safe, of high quality and taught by trained teachers), including support to community-based groups, NGOs, educational institutions and national programs providing lifelong learning, functional adult literacy and intergenerational education.



10. Support older women's right to health and to age well. Advocate and support full access to free age-friendly health and community care, affordable medicines and devices to help with age-related diseases and declines (e.g. eye glasses, hearing aids, mobility devices) and dignified end-of-life care. Include older women and grandmother-headed households in poverty reduction strategies and improving

access to the basic foundations for health, e.g. clean water, proper sanitation and nutritious foods.

11. Include older women/grandmothers in the HIV/AIDS response. Increase funding and scale up effective programs that specifically include grandmothers/older women and the young people in their care who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Make it a priority to address the continuing high levels of HIV infection and reproductive health concerns among adolescent and young women. Learn more about the prevalence of HIV among older women and prioritize this population for education about prevention, and for treatment and care.

12. Support the development, passage and use of a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons. Ensure that gender equality and the particular needs of older women are addressed.

13. Press governments to incorporate the United Nations Principles for Older Persons into their programs and policies. These include dignity, participation, independence, care and self-fulfillment.

14. Call upon governments, policy-makers, international agencies and non-governmental organizations to recognize that:

- older women contribute significantly to the economy and the care of upcoming generations
- older women must not be left behind
- older women count and must be counted!

15. Spread the word! Be an active voice for the rights of older women.

