

The following dramatic presentation is intended to raise awareness of older women's struggle for human rights in sub-Saharan Africa. It is not a GRAN document but is the creative copyrighted work of Victoria, BC GRAN Phyllis Webster. All questions and enquiries should be directed to Phyllis Webster at nudgeccm@yahoo.ca

With many thanks to Phyllis for this submission.

Hope for the Future: Achieving Human Rights for Older Women in sub-Saharan Africa

Purpose: The purpose of this play is to help people in churches, communities, educational organizations and social justice groups understand the barriers older women/grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) face in achieving and protecting their rights.

Last year GRAN developed a document entitled *Older Women Count: Understanding and Supporting the Rights of Older Women/Grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa*. This report was written by Peggy Edwards, Pauline Barrett, Louise Bergeron and Phyllis Webster. The executive summary can be accessed by [clicking here](#). The summary and full report are available on the GRAN website at <http://grandmothersadvocacy.org/older-women-count>. This play illustrates, in a dramatic form, many of the topics covered in this report.

The play is meant to help us better understand the situation, barriers and strengths of older women/grandmothers in SSA. It would be best if we could invite women from Africa to tell us in their own words about the barriers discussed in this play; however, that is not often possible. Walking in another person's shoes helps us engage emotionally with the grandmothers of Africa in a way that is respectful and honouring of their lives. I hope that this Readers' Theatre play shows that the women are strong, resilient and courageous. With solidarity and some support (financial, emotional, educational) by governments, civil society, and the local and international communities, they will find ways to help themselves, their grandchildren and their communities.

In short, this play is meant:

- a. to educate the audience about the barriers older women experience
- b. to celebrate and to honour their courage and resilience
- c. to suggest some ways that solutions can be found within and without individual countries

Dedication:

I dedicate this play to the grandmothers of sub-Saharan Africa, their grandchildren and their communities.

Suggestions for using the Play

Establish that reading the play will take about 40 minutes to read without interruptions.

The facilitator should give a warning that the play will deal with difficult subject matter and point out that there will be time for questions. Suggest that the audience write some notes while listening so that they can remember their questions. Of course, not every facilitator will know all

the answers but she/he could offer to find the answer and get back to the group. I have included some of my research sources in the “Notes” and the “Older Women Count!” documents have an extensive bibliography.

Ask for volunteer readers. Hand out individual roles and give everyone time to read through and ask for help with pronunciation, if required. I always warn readers that some roles will cause tears so if anyone is feeling sensitive about her topic (e.g., rape or violence), she can exchange her text with another reader. You might want the actors to sit in a semi-circle at the front of the room facing the audience, and stand when reading their piece. Remind everyone to read slowly and with feeling. Zahra should pause after each reading and then read the next subhead so that the audience has time to make the shift to a different topic.

Let people know that several grandmother groups and individuals have read the play and have made recommendations, which I have tried to incorporate. Thank you to everyone who has helped with this.

Adapt the play to your audience and the time you have. Some of the sections can be left out to make it shorter or perhaps only one or two can be read to lead to a discussion about those topics facilitated by someone who has done some research. For instance, #1 “The Effect of AIDS” and # 4 “Health problems” could be read followed by a discussion using information from Pillar 2 (Health) in the “Older Women Count” document. Other pairings could be # 5 “Violence Against Women” and #6 “Rape of women”. Another idea is that your group could divide the play into parts and read it over several meetings.

Groups who have used the play “Climbing the Ladder to Success: Barriers to Education for Girls in sub-Saharan Africa” have done some creative things to make the performance more visual which have been very successful! For example, one group of readers dressed in black faced the back of the room; each person turned to face the audience when it was her turn. At the end, all 14 readers faced the audience. Wearing green shirts would suggest the “hope” in the titles.

A Request:

If you plan to use this Readers’ Theatre presentation, I would ask you to do two things.

1. Write to me at nudgeccm@yahoo.ca and exchange phone numbers so that I can walk you through ways of doing the play and for you to ask questions.
2. I would appreciate a short evaluation stating when the play was performed, for whom, and how it was received. Suggestions about problem areas are welcome.

I hope you and your audience will enjoy presenting and discussing the play and perhaps deciding you would like to learn more and designing an action such as a letter writing campaign or taking the play to another group to help them learn more about older women in Africa.

Sincerely
Phyllis Webster
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Hope for the Future: Achieving Human Rights for Older Women in sub-Saharan Africa

Good day! My name is Zahra Themba but you may call me Nkuku which means “grandmother” in Setswana, my first language. I live in the beautiful country of Botswana in East Africa. I want to introduce you to some of my sister grandmothers in Africa who are sometimes the “old and forgotten”. They come from different countries where situations are very diverse. But we all have some similar problems and abuses of our human rights which they will tell you about. But I would like you also to know that they are working hard to overcome their difficulties. Like me, many are raising their grandchildren after their own children have died. As grandmothers, children or grandchildren, you can imagine the immense sorrow we suffer.... but I must not talk so much and let them tell you their stories. You will hear not only their sorrow but also their tremendous strength and courage.

(After a short pause, Zahra should read each of the sub titles.)

Notes:

“Old and forgotten, Africa’s elderly face more problems.” Around 30 percent of older women in Sub-Saharan Africa head skip-generation households, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). In some countries, the figures are even higher. More than four out of ten orphans are cared for by their grandmothers in Tanzania, and in Zimbabwe it is about six in ten. UN-AIDS estimates both countries have more than two million AIDS orphans.”

(Pause)

1. The Effect of AIDS

My name is Jamila and I am from Tanzania. You may call me Bibi which is grandmother in Swahili. I am one of many grandmothers in my country who look after grandchildren and other young people whose parents have died. I had 5 children. One by one they died of HIV/AIDs; their spouses also died or disappeared. My husband has also passed- a mining accident - so I am alone.

As each of my adult children lay dying, I promised them I would look after their children. I now have 15 to look after, although four others have grown up and left the village. My oldest grandchild is a girl who is 19 and she is a great help to me in feeding and looking after the other children. When the first of my children, a son, became ill we kept it a secret because the disease is so terrible and often families are isolated and feared because they have this terrible wasting disease, and there was no doctor nearby to help him. Now, there are programs for some people to get medicine, so that they can become healthy once again.

I am grateful that at age 61, I am still healthy and can work hard in my fields growing vegetables and maize, but know that I will soon need more help. Fortunately, there is a Tanzanian organization, which has come to my village which is many miles from Dodoma, the capital. They have brought us programs to help us understand the nature of HIV/AIDs, how to prevent it and how to care for the ones who are sick. At first they used plays and songs to help us learn. Those plays were so sad that I wept, but they also were funny in parts.

I learned that I was not alone and that others in the community cared about me. The Stephen Lewis Foundation and many grandmothers in Canada are helping us to overcome our pain and sorrow by supporting our talking circles, where we discuss our problems and determine how we can make things better. Now, we are teaching each other and sharing our sorrows and hopes for the future.

And now I must sit down and listen to the others who will tell us more about being an older woman in Africa.

(Pause)

2. Lack of Pensions and Government Support

My name is Nomalanga and I am from Zimbabwe. You may call me CuCu (coo coo) in my native tongue, Kikuyu. Like Jamila, I too am looking after my grandchildren: nine in all. I have many problems because I want all the children to go to school. I know that is the only way they will ever be able to change their lives. I need money for their school fees and to buy pencils, notebooks, shoes and uniforms for six of the nine. Three are young women and need pads when they have periods so that they can continue to go to school. Fortunately, we have a group who make wonderful hygiene kits so that the girls can wash the pads and reuse them.

I am already 60 and receive a little money from the government to help with food for the children, but it is not enough. There is no old age pension and I understand that is true in many African countries.

I never had the opportunity to go to school so I cannot read. Perhaps if I could read, I could fill out forms to apply for extra money but the government offices are a long way away and there is no one to help me. But I do not give up. I have just joined a group in my community who are teaching older women like me to read and write. They are also speaking out to the government—to get older people better support and proper pensions and to get rid of school fees. I sing as I work and am as cheerful as I can be so that the children are also happy.

I must not give up hope for a better future for me and for other grandmothers and their grandchildren.

(Pause)

3. Land Grabbing

Thank you to my friends Zahra, Jamila and Nomalanga for their stories. My name is Grace and I live in Uganda. I am not yet a grandmother, but my story is very common for women of all ages whose husbands die. My husband was a butcher and I farmed our little plot of land. We were not rich but we were happy and had everything we needed. My husband fell ill and died. His relatives tried to take my land. Uganda has laws to protect widows like me, but the authorities in my village refused to give me any help. My husband's brothers and sisters threatened me. Sometimes, relatives set fire to the crops or burn down a widow's house to get their way, or force the widow to marry the brother of her deceased husband.

I decided that I had to do something, so I walked 25 miles to get help. The official in the office said he could help me if I gave him money. I had no money so I walked home. Fortunately, for me a wonderful group called the International Justice Mission took on my case. It took a long time but after three years they were able to help me get a title to my land. Now, my children and I are safe. You must know that this is a very common experience for widows. Even the police will not help because they say it is a "family matter" so they cannot look into it. Many women are widowed in my area because of AIDS; I am sure one of my sister grandmothers will tell you more about that.

Notes:

It is important to know that, in most African groups, men own the land. When a man dies, the male relatives feel the land should return to the family. It is a cultural norm which groups such as the International Justice Mission and government legislation will one day help change. In developing countries, women represent more than 60 % to 80% of the agricultural labour force and produce much of the food. Yet, women, who are increasingly heading households, own less than 1% of the land.

Learn more about Grace from the International Justice Mission website.

(Pause)

4. Health Problems

My name is Sincerely and I live in South Africa. You may call me Umakhulu, which is grandmother in my language, Xhosa. I will laugh when you say that because you cannot make the special click sound with which it begins. Don't worry, I cannot say some of the words you find so easy in English such as "Sas ka chew on". Oh my, I am sure that is not right but I know it is the name of one of your large Canadian provinces.

I would like to tell you what it is like to be an older women living with HIV and other health problems. Yes, I am not afraid to say the word even though so many people deny that they have family members who have died of AIDS. My husband, who was a truck driver picked up HIV on the road and he passed it on to me. Now you understand why I have HIV and why my youngest baby died of AIDS. I buried her tiny body in the graveyard in my village and often go to visit her there. It is quiet and peaceful there. Sometimes I find a flower to place on the grave and I sit beside the little cross and sing a lullaby to her. But I must not burden you with my sorrow.

I now have the ART or anti-retroviral drugs provided by the government and know how to take them. It is complicated because I also have diabetes and need medication for that too. Insulin is expensive to get and the doctor does not know how my two diseases will affect each other.

I am doing much better now, but I am one of the lucky ones. I know that other grandmothers have not had the chance to get tested so they do not know their status, and many face age discrimination and are not well treated at the health clinics.

I still fear that I will die and there will be no-one left to look after the children. And I am very concerned about the young women and men who think they will live forever and are not taking precautions against pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. So I help the nurse talk to the young people in the local school. Both boys and girls must learn how to use condoms and how to protect themselves against this terrible disease.

My husband died of tuberculosis brought on by HIV infection. Some people still blame the woman for the husband's death, call them witches and send them away from the community.

Notes:

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus and it causes AIDS, the disease which develops after the virus has weakened an individual's immune system. Many people who are HIV-positive die of TB and other treatable AIDS-related diseases.

It is important to note that there needs to be more education of doctors, nurses, and health workers about the ways that drugs for the many health issues (malaria, TB, diabetes) work together.

(Pause)

5. Gender-based Violence: Domestic

Good morning, my sister Gogos in Africa, in Canada and to everyone here who is interested in the problems and rights of grandmothers in Africa.

I am afraid to give you my name because of the difficult subject I wish to discuss. You may call me Gogo N. "Gogo" means grandmother in my language. You know that many women around the world are abused. In my part of the world, some consider it acceptable for a man to beat his wife and children. The husband is always the main person. In my culture, a man can have three wives. I was the third wife and I have 4 children. I was afraid for all of us because I knew my husband had HIV and he refused to go to the clinic to have it confirmed and get on treatment. He was very angry and beat all of us because he was so afraid. He broke my son's arm and blinded my sister in one eye with his punches. In some way, it made him feel better. I complained to the police, but they told me to go home and deal with it within the family. He died a long and painful death, nursed by us all.

I know that wife and child abuse happens all around the world and also in Canada. Domestic abuse happens at all ages. It does not stop when you get older. I wonder what you would advise young women who are about to enter relationships, sometimes at way too young an age. I try to help my sons know that beating women and children is not the way to deal with problems. With the help of a community organization, my sister grandmothers and I are educating ourselves and our children about how to talk about problems and to work on solutions around violence. We are talking to our traditional leaders and the police about protecting our right to be free from violence in our homes and community.

(Pause)

6. Gender-based Violence: Sexualized Violence as a Weapon of War

Good day! My name is Patience, and I live in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I am a mother, grandmother and nurse. You may already know the story of the terrible war in the Congo where there has been fighting for many years. One of the terrible consequences of the war is that soldiers and government militias are using rape as a way of terrifying the people and destroying communities. I work at the Panzi hospital where surgeons perform operations to repair the terrible damage done to babies, teenagers, mothers and grandmothers. Many have been raped repeatedly by gangs. Others have had objects such as sticks or guns forced into their vaginas which destroys the person's inside. Often women are left incontinent and are rejected by everyone because they smell so bad.

Why do soldiers do these terrible things in wartime? Most soldiers are young and under the control of very strong commanders who demand that the soldiers commit gang rapes because they know that the families will not take the women back. They will say, "You are no longer clean and I do not want you back." Because the court system is so corrupt, the commanders can prevent the soldiers from being arrested. Sometimes rape is accepted by many throughout the society because men believe that no one is going to do anything about it. Of course, rapes pass on HIV.

It is also very disturbing that there are still some who believe that a man who has HIV can be cured if he has sex with an infant or very young girls. Young girls sometimes befriend soldiers because they are living in terrible poverty and the man can give them some money. In all, hundreds of thousands of women have been raped and many are rejected by their families, and the children are also rejected.

There is some good news. A group of young women lawyers in Congo have joined together in a non-profit group to bring rapists to trial. Gradually the laws are changing and more men are being jailed. The lawyers are also visiting schools to talk about rape as a crime. It will take a long time for attitudes to change as you well know!

The Panzi Hospital in Bukuvu admits many women per month who have been raped. Many must have long operations to rebuild their reproductive organs, which have been brutally destroyed. The women are given physical, psychological support, legal assistance, education and advocacy support and help with reintegration into society. You may want to find out more about the wonderful work of the Panzi Foundation when you have time.

I am hopeful that one day, my beloved country will return to full stability and we can all have peace and prosperity in our beautiful Africa.

Notes:

Google “Panzi Hospital” for more information.

Much of this information about the effects of the war in the DRC was taken from Peter Eichenstaedt’s book *Consuming the Congo: War and Conflict Minerals in the World’s Deadliest Place* (2011).

“Rape by Terrorists: A UN Report documents Sexual Attacks in War.” Dulcie Leimbach, May 2, 2017.

Forty-eight women were raped every hour at the height of the conflict giving DRC the title of “The Rape Capital of the World”.

For information about the Canadian lawyers, see “The Equality Effect-child rape victims in Kenya”.

Rape is used for ethnic cleansing. It erodes the fabric of the community in a way that few weapons can. It is a form of psychological warfare to humiliate the enemy.

“Dynamic Women Jurists are a nonprofit group of young lawyers struggling to bring rapists to trial and put them in prison. It is an uphill battle despite the recently adopted reform of rape laws.” page 66 of Peter Eichenstaedt’s book.

Christine Mpinda is one of the jurists.

(Pause)

7. Accusations of Witchcraft

I, too, am sorry that you cannot call me by my real name, but if you like you may call me Gogo S. I live in Tanzania. I am 70 years old now- which in my culture is considered very old. I have raised six children and many grandchildren after their parents passed. One day, someone saw me sitting by myself. I was talking to myself about the pain and sorrow in my life. My husband had passed, four children had also passed and I was speaking about my love for them because I did not want them to be forgotten.

I have always been very quiet and my sister-in-law thought this behaviour was so odd that she spread the story that I was a witch. She had also seen me gathering herbs in hills around the village and accused me of having red eyes, a sign she said meant I was a witch. We are very poor in this village and I think she wanted me to be gone so that she could have some of my things. I have very nice cooking pots to help me cook for my twelve grandchildren and two orphaned children from the community. My brother-in-law also wanted my house and my little plot of land. Because of her accusation, I was taken to a village court where I was to “demonstrate” my innocence. How was I do that? My husband and children had passed they said because the mumbling while sitting and looking towards other people’s huts were all signs of witchery. Of course, I have red eyes because I hover over a wood fire for hours every day. And, I am sure you understand that I also cry because I am sad.

Fortunately, an organization was nearby and was working in 90 villages in our area. They were training village committee members about women’s rights, especially those of widows. They were speaking to our traditional healers about why so many people were dying of AIDS and helped them understand that widows were not the cause of those deaths. The NGO helped community members put on traditional plays with songs and dancing. Our community began to understand many things after that. Before that I thought that I would have to leave with no support or money. I must admit that I also had thought of killing myself.

You will be happy to know that the organization is also training advisers called paralegals who give advice on land, inheritance and marriage rights. We are getting help to build houses and

sanitation facilities for women like me. So life has improved. I hope no other woman has to go through being accused of witchcraft.

Notes:

“Fighting Witchcraft Accusations”. HelpAge International

“What Makes a Community Cry Witch?” Laura Angela Bagnetto

(Pause)

8. Lack of Economic Opportunity in Rural Areas

My name is Bongani and I live in a village in Limpopo province in South Africa. I cannot read or write which is a great sorrow for me. Many of the grandmothers in my village are the same. We have many grandchildren we are raising and we need to have money for their food, clothes, schooling and other things. I want to tell you about a wonderful story which came about through co-operation of many women and help from a friend in Victoria, Canada. She has made a documentary film which is called “The Thinking Garden” which you can ask her to show you.

Here is our story. In the past, everyone had gardens and we collected herbs and green plants in the hills which I added to other vegetables to make an excellent stew. A terrible drought and the problems of Apartheid meant that we became very poor and the children became very thin. Then in 1992 we women decided that we had to do something to help ourselves. We started a co-operative farm which we call Hleketani (eh tan ee) Community Garden. The chief of our area let us have a big field where we grow tomatoes, beans, chilis, pumpkins and greens. We sell them to local communities.

The farm helps me and my fellow farmers sustain our families. Those vegetables which are not perfect and cannot be sold are shared amongst us. We also share the food with those people in the village who have HIV. That means that we are all able to eat well. Because I do not have to buy vegetables, I have more money to buy soap and other things that we need. I am able to help pay for the school costs of my grandchildren. Because we get lots of exercise, we do not get sick. If you were to visit us, you would hear us singing as we work and you would know that we are happy in our hearts.

Unfortunately, we have had some problems. A few years ago, someone stole our irrigation system but some donors from South Africa and Canada helped us replace the pipes and hoses. Some of the men in the village asked to join us, but we said no. We wanted to show them that we older women have power and can run a business when we all work together.

Notes:

“The Thinking Garden” Directed by Christine Walsh. Written and produced by Elizabeth Vibert and Christine Walsh. Cinematography and editing by Moira Simpson. Assistant Director Basani Ngobeni.

(Pause)

9. Urban Poverty

Good day, my fellow grandmothers in Africa and in Canada. My name is Precious. I live in Kibera, which is a large slum in Nairobi, Kenya. We live in a community of over one million people and we do not have good sanitation or free clean water for bathing and drinking. Our streets are heavily polluted because there is an open sewage system. Because we have to line up for communal toilets, many people use a plastic bag and then throw it away. These are called “flying toilets”. You can imagine the smell! I moved here with my son when we were evicted because I could not pay the rent. My son found work for awhile but then he got sick leaving me with three grandchildren to look after. My daughter works as a hairdresser but she has to support her own children so does not have a lot to share with me.

When I first came to Kibera, it was mostly men but now there are many more older women. We are always out looking for food or things we can trade on the street. Some of the women make money by doing laundry or cooking food. But we are discriminated against because we are old and poor. The worst is when someone gets a disability and develops problems walking. Thank goodness we have each other. I go to church with my friends and my neighbours look in on us from time to time.

One of our biggest problems in Kibera is the high rate of mugging, theft and rape. Someone told me that one in four women is raped. Older women are targeted because some young men believe that having sex with a grandma cures HIV and washes off all sins. But, you will be glad to know that many of us are going to classes sponsored by a local NGO called Usama! We call ourselves “Shosko Jikingo) which means “Grandmother defend yourself”. We learn all kinds of things such as how to identify an attacker, how to use our voice and trick our way out of a dangerous situation and how to fight back. The first thing we learn is how to do a palm punch. Perhaps I can show you how later!

If you ever visit Africa, I invite you to Kibera to see how many people must live. We try to find happiness where we can but as you have heard me say, life is very hard.

Notes:

Kibera is Africa's largest urban slum. With its unpaved streets, tin and cardboard houses, and mounds of garbage, Kibera is a tinderbox of dozens of Kenyan ethnicities. Like anywhere, cultural differences can lead to tensions and difficulties.

“These Kenyan Grandmothers are Learning to Fight Back Against Rapists.”

Another issue which this play might deal with in more detail is the fact that many grandmothers have mobility problems. The lack of help in this area is an area for more research.

(Pause)

10. Lack of Educational Opportunity (Two stories)

A. First Story: I am so happy to meet all of you! My name is Zuwena and I am a proud citizen of South Africa. I live in a township called Khayelitsha (pronounced Kie yel eet sha) which is a suburb of Cape Town on the Cape Flats. You might like to call me Gogo Zuwena. You must know that I was a young girl who went to school for only a few years and I never did learn to read because the books were in English and I speak Xhosa. I was married when I was fifteen and soon had children, three boys and twin girls. I was happy to be a mother except that I did not have the money to make sure they had good food and warm clothes for the winter when it is cold and wet.

One of my daughters loved school so much and hoped to become a teacher, but... secondary school is very expensive because we have to buy uniforms, shoes, textbooks and other school supplies. Fortunately, an organization called Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS (GAPA) helped us. We call it GAPA. I joined a program for the older women in our community. Most of us had little or no education, but they helped us understand what our rights were around our land, domestic violence, voting and protection of our health. We learned about nutrition, stress management, hygiene, and how to prevent diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis. Once we were comfortable, we were invited to form co-operative groups to learn business skills and to generate income. My group does some beautiful beadwork and embroidery on cushions; we also make toys. GAPA helped us know that “Together we are stronger.”

Some of us had small grandchildren to care for. The Stephen Lewis Foundation helped fund bursaries so that 89 of our little children could go to pre-school. Now we are free to work together. We also have started a garden on a much smaller scale than the one that the ladies in Limpopo province started. Is not “The Thinking Garden” a wonderful name?

(Pause)

B. Second Story: Thank you, Zuwena. My name is Florence Chepeto, and I want to tell you my story because I know how interested you are in education for all children and for all of us. One lady from your country called it “life-long learning”. I live in a small village in Kenya. I had never learned how to read because my parents wanted me to marry and to get a dowry and stay to look after the farm. “My parents did not value the need for education.” One day, my granddaughter brought home a book from the community school and I wanted so badly to know what it was about.

Most of the parents and grandparents in my community could not read and so we asked the teachers at the school to teach us. We worked hard and had fun as we learned. You must know how wonderful it is to be able to read! I now feel “part of those who are in the modern world”! Now I can read legal documents, and check to see that I am not being cheated over payments. I can read the information on medicine, and look after my personal records. I can read newspapers and find out about the world beyond my little village. I feel more confident because I am more knowledgeable and can have an opinion of my own. I can read my grandchildren’s reports to see how they are progressing! I have been borrowing books on agriculture “so that I can learn how to farm”. And best of all, I can read stories to my little ones!

I learned to read at age 60. One of my classmates was in his 80s, and because his eyesight was so bad that he didn’t think he would be much of a reader. But he came to the classes regularly because he wanted to send a message to the rest of the village that this was important. Can you imagine how big our smiles are as we show others the power of reading!?

Notes:

World Bank: Women reinvest 90% of their income in their families and community. Men invest only 30% to 40% in their families and community.

Look up GAPA on Google for more information.

Grace’s true story can be read in the article “What’s it like to start reading at 60?” by Sean Coughlan, Education Correspondent for the BBC (September 13, 2017)

(Pause)

11. Consequences of Climate Change

My name is Zakia, and I am a farmer in the north-west corner of Zimbabwe. You have heard from my sisters about so many problems. My problem has been caused by what so many people are denying is happening. We in Zimbabwe know that climate change is real. We are a country which depends on agriculture and usually we can grow enough to support our large population. In 2015 and 2016 the rains did not come and then we suffered from Cyclone Dineo which flooded most of our beautiful fields. Once again, we could not grow crops and feed ourselves. We had to depend on aid from NGOs. For proud people this is not easy to accept, but we cannot let our children die.

In our culture, it is the women who tend the land, so it was particularly hard for us. We had to walk farther to get water which was safe to drink, and we had no money to buy seeds or fertilizer. We had to ask some of our children to leave school to work in our poor fields or look for paid work. Men who depended on their wives growing food to support them became stressed and many women suffered beatings because we had no money to give our husbands.

When the rains return and we can grow our crops in the usual way, we hope that the men will feel better, and that our children can return to school. Perhaps I will one day be able to take the extension courses so that I can learn more about some new methods of raising crops in this new environment. Are you doing anything in your country to help with climate change? I hope that we can all work on this together so that our grandchildren will have a better future.

Notes:

“Climate Change in sub-Saharan Africa and its Implications for the Work of the Grandmothers Advocacy Network”.

Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Lesotho and Somalia declared national emergencies during the drought of 2015/16. The drought is not over and four countries Kenya, Nigeria, Yemen, South Sudan and Somalia are facing drought and concurrently civil conflicts.

(Pause).

12. Women as Leaders in the Community

My name is Keasha and I am a citizen of Africa. I am one of the lucky grandchildren who has had an education. In fact, I have just been called to the bar in Ghana. Thank you to all my grandmothers who have just told you about their problems and some of the things they do to make lives better for their grandchildren, themselves and their communities. I think you can see that working together is a great way for all of us to make changes. I am not yet a grandmother because I am only 27 years old. But I would like to tell you about some of the women who have become great leaders in creating social change.

My first story is about Queen Mother Veronica Abugrago who lives in north-east Ghana. She has gathered the junior queens together to talk about how they can help their communities. With their help, Queen Mother Veronica has helped reduce the dowry or bride price from four cows to one cow which means that younger men are able to marry. Female genital mutilation has become less common which means that health in the community is improving. I am also very excited that more girls are getting to school and are learning about their rights. Thank you, Queen Mother Veronica.

Another woman who has inspired young people like me is Jahu Dukureh whose campaigning in the Gambia helped the government of the day begin a campaign against Female Genital Mutilation. Other governments have done the same and I have heard that the government in Canada has listened to advocates there and have set aside money to help us in this campaign at the international level. Of course, I know that making laws is not enough. Governments need to enforce the law and it is my generation who can work on that. Thank you, Jahu.

More women in Africa, including grandmothers, are now finding their voices and helping us change some of the old ways, which have harmed women. The Stephen Lewis Foundation and the Canadian Grandmothers Campaign has supported four gatherings of grandmothers in various countries. At each of these gatherings, the grandmothers have produced powerful statements calling for changes and respect for their human rights. I am so proud of them and plan to continue their work to make our world a better place for women and men.

Notes:

“How the Gambia banned female genital mutilation” Maggie O’Kane November 24, 2017.

Diane and Giuseppe Scaletta “The Queen Mother Veronica Project” The good news is that Queen Mother Veronica has helped negotiate one cow as a bride price (July 2018). Congratulations Queen Mother Veronica!!

(Pause)

13. Our Hope for the Futures of our Granddaughters and Grandsons

I have heard my sisters tell their stories of their problems and also of how they have worked with others to solve some of their difficulties. I am so proud to be part of this wonderful gathering of older women.

My name is Tabia. I have spoken to many of you from Canada and I know that you, too, worry about the future of your grandchildren. You worry about the education system and whether the children will learn what is necessary for the 21st century. We all worry about our countries' health systems and hope that everyone will receive the care they need from birth to death. We all worry about our political systems and hope that those in power will remember that they are there to work for the people and to create possibilities for meaningful work, health, freedom from violence, education, poverty reduction, clean water and air and, very importantly, peace.

In Africa, we are particularly haunted by the specter of tyrants, and of exploitation by overseas corporations that take our resources and leave very little behind. There are many stories about these problems but I do not have time now!

As African grandmothers, we would like to know that our grandchildren will remember the best parts of their culture and will work against the barriers that prevent girls, in particular, from fulfilling their dreams. We dream along with you that one day, we can sit under our favourite tree and watch the world become what it could be and that we can die contented that we have left the world a better place.

(Pause)

Zahra's story

You have heard the stories of my sisters in Africa. Now, I, Zahra, want to tell you that just because we are old, we are not yet dead and we have strong minds and hearts. While the buzzards may be circling, even our sexuality is still alive. We have strong backs (perhaps a little less strong than before) and much love for the children we care for.

I am happy that some progress is being made in some of these areas but there is still much work to do here in Africa and in all parts of the world. We must all work towards having equality, which to me means having the same rights as others regardless of age or gender. Equality also means being able to express one's opinions freely. We must have access to education, employment, financial help and social security, health and long-term care and medication. We all want for ourselves and for others, to participate fully in a life that has dignity, meaning and purpose, and to be free of discrimination. I am sure that in Canada, this is what older women also want. Am I correct?

Now, please join me in a dance of sisterhood. A young woman from Canada says grandmothers love to sing and dance so let us do so!

Notes:

“Entitled to the same rights: What older women say about their rights to non-discrimination and equality, and to freedom from violence, abuse and neglect.” HelpAge International. Zahra has used some of the same words as the women in this excellent report!