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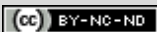
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PORTFOLIO: Grandmother Power, a Global Phenomenon

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Grandmother Power, a Global Phenomenon

Paola Gianturco

Before the meeting began, I asked the members of a women's group near Kisumu, Kenya to tell me how many children they had. Each answered in the same, formulaic way: "I have six and 10 adopted;" "I have four and 12 adopted;" "I have three and 9 adopted." My interpreter, the Director of the organization, explained that the word "adopted" was a stand-in for "I am raising my grandchildren because my children died of Aids." As a mother and grandmother, my heart dropped.

That year (2006), I met so many other grandmothers in Cameroun, Swaziland, and South Africa who were raising children orphaned by Aids that it seemed as if the future of the African continent rested in the hands of grandmothers. I wondered what grandmothers were doing other places. I quickly identified 70 activist grandmother groups in 35 countries who were working on health, education, poverty, energy, justice, the environment and peace.

From 2009-2011, I visited 17 groups scattered across North America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. I interviewed 123 women, transcribed the interviews, edited them for length, and sent them to my interpreters to read back to the women to check for accuracy. Those interviews and my photographs were published in *Grandmother Power, A Global Phenomenon*. Even though one person goaded me, "Grandmothers are wrinkly women who are older than Whistler's Mother," referring to that iconic US painting, most readers were inspired by the grandmothers' energy, courage, creativity, commitment and effectiveness. Three stories will give you an idea why:

1. In Tilonia, India, illiterate grandmothers attended The Barefoot College. After a six-month course, they returned to their rural homes to build and install solar panels for electricity. As result of their success, life changed dramatically. Midwives could deliver babies at night with greater awareness; it was safe to walk after dark. People could charge their cell phones and do electronic banking; children no longer suffered from lung diseases caused by studying near kerosene lanterns. The grandmothers returned to The Barefoot College to teach other Indian grandmothers and soon, The United Nations began sending grandmothers from other parts of the developing world to study with them. Because the Indian grandmothers were illiterate and shared no common language with their students, they taught using equipment demonstrations. By now, grandmother solar engineers have brought light to 400,000 rural people in 24 countries. Bunker Roy, founder of the Barefoot College told me, "I meet them as grandmothers. But they return to their villages as tigers!"

Grandmothers in India

2. In Argentina between 1976 and 1983, the military dictatorship killed authors, journalists and intellectuals. Terrified, people in the country that had the highest literacy rate in South America stopped reading. Years later, hoping to re-engage children with books, the Mempo Giardinelli Foundation asked grandmothers to read aloud to children. Today in Argentina, 2,000 grandmothers volunteer in classrooms where they read every week. Tracking-studies document their progress: literature and unconditional affection facilitate children's love of books. The Storytelling Grandmother program was incorporated into the national school curriculum and is now being copied by seven other countries.

3. When grandmothers near Velingara, Senegal, learned from community health workers that their daughters were dying during childbirth due to hemorrhaging from female genital mutilation, they were shocked. They had not only championed the practice, the grandmothers had conducted the surgeries. They went immediately to the Imam to ask whether the Koran required FGM. It did not. They vowed to end the tradition. Abandoning a long-standing tradition supported by villagers with diverse vested interests required systemic change. The Grandmother Project, founded by anthropologist Judi Aibel, helped the grandmothers collaborate with Imams and village chiefs to convene intergenerational meetings with men and women. First, they listed "good" traditions that should be sustained. Only later did they identify "bad" traditions that were to be discontinued. Exogenous marriage made it crucial that nearby communities also collaborated. Over a three-year period, 20 adjacent villages decided to stop FGM, the practice of child marriage and hence reduce teen pregnancy levels.

The groups in Grandmother Power are doing more than changing the world. They are teaching important lessons about values and character. Canadian grandmothers are teaching generosity and collaboration. In the Philippines and Argentina, grandmothers model patience, perseverance and justice. South Africa and Swaziland grandmothers exemplify resilience and mercy. In Ireland, Peru, Laos, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates, grandmothers are sustaining traditions while their sisters in India, Senegal and the United States catalyze change in their communities. Indigenous and Israeli grandmothers are seeding hope and peace for the future.

A worldwide grandmother movement has begun. There are more grandmothers on the planet than at any other time in human history. In the developed world, grandmothers are younger, healthier, better educated and better off than ever before. In the United States, there were 38 million grandmothers in 2012 (projected to be 42 million by 2015), and the average age of a first-time grandmother is 47. But demographics alone do not explain this burgeoning movement. It may be an expression of anthropologist Kristen Hawkes' Grandmother Hypothesis, which suggests that women live past their reproductive years to help their grandchildren. As of 2008, almost two million children lived with grandmother caregivers in the United States, an arrangement that crossed ethnic and racial lines. In Africa, between 40% and 60% of the 12

million Aids orphans live in households headed by grandmothers, according to the Stephen Lewis Foundation, Toronto.

The grandmother movement might never have happened without the Baby Boomers (Boomies in Canada, The Bulge in the U.K.) – those who are experienced at changing the world. As students in the 1960s, they redefined human rights, advocated against war and defended free speech. Many grandmothers continue to play prominent and public roles. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, grandmother of eight, is President of Liberia. Michelle Bachelet, grandmother of two, is President of Chile. Whoopi Goldberg, Mia Farrow, Jessica Lange and Vanessa Redgrave are all UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors. In fact, Jane Goodall once remarked, “I am saving the world for my grandchildren.”

Activist grandmothers’ commitment to social change gives their lives purpose and meaning. Laura Carstensen, Director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, wrote in *The Boston Globe*, June 20, 2014: “A growing literature suggests that such engagement is self-reinforcing, enhancing physical and psychological health in old age.” The benefits to society, then, are obvious. Grandmothers are a little-recognized, well-qualified, highly motivated, ample resource that can help improve the future of our troubled world.

About the Author:

Paola Gianturco is an author and photographer whose fifth illustrated book, *Grandmother Power, A Global Phenomenon* (PowerHouse Books, 2012) documents the work of activist grandmothers in 15 countries on 5 continents. 100% of the book’s royalties contributes directly toward helping African grandmothers raise children. One hundred percent of her author royalties from the book benefit African grandmothers raising children orphaned by Aids.