

## Whose Vulnerability Counts? Grassroots African and Central American Women Leaders Call for Development Investments to Support their Community Efforts to Fight AIDS

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Violet Shivutse from GROOTS Kenya addresses partners and colleagues during our reception in the Global Village

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The International AIDS Conference, which closed on August 8, was largely focused on scientific research (particularly anti-retroviral treatment), so-called vulnerable groups (including transgender people, men who have sex with men, commercial sex workers and injecting drug users), and calls for top-down health system reform by high-level players such as the Clinton and Gates Foundations. Amid these themes,

the Huairou Commission and its partners focused on the realities of HIV and AIDS as a development issue, as it affects the lives of those who are most affected by the disease - grassroots women living and working in their own poor communities, caring for the infected and affected on a daily basis.

Within a conference bringing together 25,000 people from around the world, the Huairou Commission strategically worked with its partners, in particular the Stephen Lewis Foundation and CORDAID, to ensure that the issues and priorities of grassroots women were voiced within the Conference, and to ensure that like-minded partners and organizations were able to come together to discuss these issues and forge plans for a way forward to ensure that they would remain on the global agenda.

For at least 10 years grassroots women, particularly in Africa, have struggled to get the world to understand AIDS as a development issue - which is how they experience it every day - to have their lived realities inform global policy on AIDS, and to get their contributions to fighting AIDS in their communities recognized local to global. We were therefore shocked to find an overwhelming focus by influential multi and bilateral agencies on human rights (de-linked from a sustainable development perspective) as the framework for AIDS interventions, and a centering of the voices of minority vulnerable groups, removed from the context of poor communities in which these groups often live.

We sought to use this Conference to bring together partners who have supported the work of home-based caregivers and other grassroots women who have organized and built networks in response to the pandemic, and to ensure our focus remained clearly on the needs and priorities of these grassroots women leaders. We did this through two strategic events - a strategy session on home-based care, and a reception for grassroots women and girls and their partners.

On Wednesday, August 6, the Huairou Commission hosted "Beyond Unpaid Caregiving: Strategic Partnering to Support and Sustain Grassroots Women's Groups' Home-Based Care Work (in the Context of HIV)," an invitation only event co-organized with GROOTS International, CORDAID and UNDP with support from the UNDP-Japan Partnership Fund (WID/GAD). The session brought together home-based caregivers with partners from foundations (CORDAID, Stephen Lewis Foundation, AJWS, the African Women's Development Fund), multi- and bilateral agencies (the World Bank AIDS Campaign Team for Africa, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs), UNDP and UNIFEM representatives, and NGOs (AIDS Free World, HelpAge International, VSO, Health Gap AWOMI). Our broad goal for the session was to explore how we can partner and what plans we can make to raise the visibility of home-based caregivers, support them to organize for impact and to leverage social, political and institutional recognition for home-based caregivers.

The session was facilitated on behalf of the Huairou Commission by Sandy Schilen, Global Facilitator of GROOTS International, and Esther Mwaura-Muiru, National Coordinator of GROOTS Kenya. They opened the session by describing the development of our home-based care work within GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission, and particularly on the growth of the Home-Based Care Alliance since the idea was spawned in 2003 at ICASA in Nairobi and the role of partners in the development of the Alliance.



**Limota Goroso-Giwa of the International Women's Communication Center during the Home-Based Care Session**

Although our AIDS Campaign and the home-based care work that forms the core of that Campaign has been focused thus far on Africa, this workshop reflected our new support for affected groups in the Garifuna and Mayan areas of the Honduran Gulf to organize and link to their African sisters. We heard from Julia Dolmo and Ana Bonillo of Nuevo Amanacer, Honduras, Mary Ganiza of the Episcopal Council of Malawi, Mercy Ilusa and Violet Shivutse of GROOTS Kenya, Florence Enyogu of UCOBAC and Limota Goroso-Giwa of the International Women's Communication Center. All of these women have been involved in creating holistic, comprehensive, women and community-led home-based care programs. They discussed their challenges, stemming from the fact that grassroots women are bearing the major burden of HIV and AIDS through their care work; how they have been able to organize for impact (including consolidation of caregivers' voices, greater ability to access resources, linking in peer networks to share capacities and trainings) and building partnerships and their own advocacy

and negotiation capacities to hold both government and civil society accountable to the needs of communities. They also discussed the continued need to win formal, institutional support for women's work in these countries and to expand this kind of representational organizing in diverse and challenging parts of West and Southern Africa.

The grassroots women presenters concluded the first part of the session by summarizing the types of support they were calling for, including physical spaces, facilitated access to development monies/grants (including for organizational development and administration at the grassroots level), and support to expand and pilot microenterprise/asset-based activities that will underwrite (and be led by) groups of caregivers.

We then turned to the partners in the room to share how their institutions are working with grassroots organizations. We were heartened by the many concrete and innovative forward-plans that the partners shared.

Leah Teklemariam of the Stephen Lewis Foundation and Geertje van Mensvoort from CORDAID shared their organizations' focus on providing on-going support to home-based caregivers, and on supporting harvesting knowledge, and linking and learning among their grantees, which directly contradicts the more common practice among donors of fragmenting and working one by one with grassroots women's groups. The importance of knowledge creation that directly includes grassroots women and that translates their knowledge into policy was echoed by Elizabeth Ninan of the World Bank MAP and Paul Davis from Health Gap (currently working with the World Health Organization on its revised health system guidelines). We also heard from several partners about direct forms of support that they could link home-based caregivers to. Ayako Shimizu of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggested grassroots organizations approach Japanese embassies in their countries for development support, and Natalie Fisher of the World YWCA expressed an interest to link home-based care groups to local YWCAs in order to find ways for the caregivers to use the physical space YWCAs have available. We challenged both of these partners in response to these concrete, welcome suggestions to help to link the grassroots organizations from their global positions to maintain these relationships, which are often more easy to discuss globally than implement locally.

We ended the session with an agreement to create a working group of people who want to create partnerships, a learning community, and track progress on efforts to scale up grassroots women's federations, and brainstorm what it will take to support grassroots women's groups to sustain involvement in World Bank and WHO initiatives. We will also make a global push for pilot projects, and move from rhetoric to action around various approaches to scale up and resource social and political recognition of caregivers as partners in development and good governance. We will center-stage our advocacy around our Compensations for Contributions initiative with support from the Japan-UNDP Partnership (WID/GAD) and partnering with CORDAID. This will be an 18-month action-oriented, participatory research study in which grassroots women caregivers working across Africa will quantify and demonstrate the contributions they have made to mitigate the HIV and AIDS pandemics in their communities as well as the gaps that exist between policies and funding and conditions on the ground.

The next day, the Huairou Commission, GROOTS International, the Girl Child Network and the Stephen Lewis Foundation co-sponsored a lunch time reception in the Global Village. The reception focused on exploring various vulnerabilities and giving grassroots women and girls, and their partners, a chance to analyze the past 10 years of building organizations and networks for empowerment and to respond to AIDS.

"We aren't here to talk about our strategies, outputs or methods, but about our lives on the ground"

The session was facilitated by Betty Makoni, founder and director of the Girl Child Network in Zimbabwe. In her own speech and the presentations from grassroots women she called upon, Betty focused on the expertise that grassroots women have developed living and working and surviving in their own poor communities, often faced with vulnerability and violence. "We aren't here to talk about our strategies, outputs or methods, but about our lives on the ground. While professionals are looking for best practices to support, grassroots women know the solutions that work, and need support, financial support and partnership to scale up those solutions. While professionals report on statistics and numbers, grassroots women experience death because it is happening in their families. We understand development not from terminology, but from our practical experiences. We've transformed ourselves from beneficiaries. Perceived victims are actually people who can lead. We need professionals to help document our impact. Look no further, look at us - we have so much wealth, we need to share, to be heard, and at the end of the day we need support to make impact."

Grassroots women and girls at the reception spoke about the importance of their own fight against AIDS as central to the empowerment of poor women as the urgency of AIDS has motivated them to build collective structures in their communities and link those groups nationally and internationally. Through systematic organizing, grassroots women in Kenya have built a Home-Based Care Alliance allowing home-based caregivers to gain recognition and play a formal role in the government response, through linking with hospitals and collecting statistics. Women from Honduras who originally learned the importance of grassroots organizing in response to the disaster of Hurricane Mitch also see AIDS as a disaster, and through a mapping process have been able to understand both the needs and capacities of grassroots communities and strengthen their platform for responding.

We then heard from grassroots women and girls from the Girl Child Network of Zimbabwe, which is now celebrating its ten year anniversary. Stembembile Mabwena, 17, and Lisa Bonongwe, 11, both active leaders in the Girl Child Network, spoke about the importance of the girls' clubs in helping them to not only understand their rights, but to build support groups and networks so that the girls can make their own rights real, to resist domestic and sexual violence. Women and girls are now working across



**Members of Girl Child Network and GROOTS Zimbabwe address the reception**

generations, as girls in the Girl Child Network have inspired their mothers and aunts to resist domestic violence, sexual violence and other vulnerabilities that leave them open to AIDS. Women there have adopted the GCN model and are now forming GROOTS Zimbabwe in order to help other women understand their rights, and to share their own examples of standing up against violence in their own homes, thereby inspiring and supporting other women to do the same.

Betty then called upon some of the donors in attendance to speak about the value they have seen in supporting grassroots women and girls to build their own organizations as a key part of the fight against AIDS and poverty and for women's empowerment. Denise Parmentier of NOVIB, Leah Teklemariam of Stephen Lewis

Foundation, Patricia Rebolledo of Horizons of Friendship and Julia Greenberg of AIDS Free World spoke about the importance of not only supporting grassroots women's organizations as a key part of their work, and also emphasized the importance of listening to organized groups of grassroots women to guide their own funding and advocacy. All of these partners praised not just the impact that networks such as GROOTS and Girl Child Network have been able to achieve, in reducing domestic violence, caring for people living with AIDS, raising the visibility of grassroots women's leadership, but have also been able to make those gains and achieve those outcomes because of their focus on building constituencies and movements.

These partners, who in many cases see themselves as a part of our movement of grassroots women, also shared their own challenges, such as being pressured to discontinue funding to certain countries based on relative national incomes or carrying forward advocacy messages important to grassroots women that are not always given space in international policy making forums.

The reception ended with a call for forward movement on issues that we all care about, and a promise to continue to work together and communicate to ensure that grassroots women's and girls priorities are no longer pushed to the sidelines in global AIDS discussions, to build bridges with other vulnerable groups and end polarization within the fight against the pandemic, to create a forum to learn on a continuous basis about the types of funding that exist for organizing, peer exchange and grassroots leadership, and to analyze resource gaps and advocate for bigger resources to get to these issues.

Special thanks to our participants from:

Girl Child Network, Zimbabwe

GROOTS Kenya

GROOTS Zimbabwe

International Women's Communication Center, Nigeria

UCOBAC, Uganda

And to our partners and supporters:

AFRUS-AIDS Partnership

CORDAID

Horizons of Friendship

Open Society Institute

Stephen Lewis Foundation

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Women's Land Link Africa Initiative

Horizons of Friendship