

Q&A with Paola Gianturco

1) How did you come to develop the idea of *Grandmother Power*?

In 2006 while working on my previous book *Women Who Light the Dark*, I asked women in Kenya, “Tell me about your family; how many children do you have?” All these women answered the same way, “Three—and six adopted.” “Four—and 16 adopted.” “Two—and four adopted.” Suddenly I realized that “adopted” really meant they were raising their grandchildren orphaned by AIDS. I left realizing that the future of that continent literally rests with the grandmothers.

I wondered what contributions grandmothers in other places were making and discovered a global activist grandmother movement. Through lots of research, I discovered 69 grandmother groups in 30 countries; the issue for me was: which ones to include! I selected the 17 groups in the book carefully, wanting to balance the issues (from education to energy to environment to human rights) and geography (15 countries on 5 continents).

2) Do you think grandmothers in the US are equally involved with activism and improving the world for their grandchildren?

In 2008, almost two million children in the United States were being raised by their grandmothers, an arrangement that crossed ethnic and racial lines: 50% of those grandmothers were white, 27% African American, 18% Hispanic and 3% Asian.

But of course grandmothers’ activism goes beyond childrearing both in the US and around the world. *Grandmother Power* documents the activism of Raging Grannies in California, for example, who dress up in crazy hats and aprons and sing funny songs to attract media attention to the political issues that they believe will make the world a better place for their grandchildren.

The *Grandmother Power* project website lists groups all over the world that US grandmothers can join, network with and support. Many of those groups are located in the United States. www.globalgrandmotherpower.com

3) Throughout your travels, what surprised you most while documenting these activist grandmothers?

I witnessed such resilience, optimism and hope of African grandmothers raising their grandchildren orphaned by AIDS.

These grandmothers—poor, old, still grieving the deaths of their own children, and sometimes HIV+ themselves—suddenly find themselves caring for 12 or 15 grandchildren. I expected they would be profoundly depressed and overwhelmed.

Instead, those I interviewed in South Africa and Swaziland—who had banded into groups to share responsibilities—told me they felt “Strong!” They had started community gardens to feed the children, and were running after-school care programs so the youngsters were safe, supervised, had a place to play, had company and help with their homework. The grandmothers taught each other how to live with HIV/AIDS and how to make and sell handicrafts (knitting, sewing, crocheting, beading), which meant they had some resources.

4) As you note, all your book projects are philanthropic. How did you select the Stephen Lewis Foundation as the nonprofit to receive your author royalties?

The grandmother groups in South Africa and Swaziland are grantees of the Stephen Lewis Foundation in Canada, whose Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign is supported by 240 grandmother groups that send small cash infusions when the African grandmothers ask: the right amount, for example, to buy seeds to start a community garden—or the right amount to buy a swing set for an after-school program.

I was so impressed by the Stephen Lewis Foundation, as well as the Canadian and the African grandmothers, that I wanted them to receive 100% of my author royalties from *Grandmother Power* to benefit the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign.

4) Is there a particular story or memory when documenting these stories that stands out for you?

Dancing. Grandmothers are enthusiastic, energetic dancers.

I danced with the *Lolas* (grandmothers) in Manila who had been forced to be sex slaves during World War II; even though they are now in their 70's and 80's, but they often play music and dance to relax in-between street demonstrations, and collecting names on petitions.

I danced with the village grandmothers who are part of The Grandmother Project in Senegal, who are putting an end to teen pregnancy, early marriage and female genital mutilation. I visited many villages near Velingara, and always the grandmothers welcomed me by singing, clapping and dancing, then pulled me in to join them. They politely disregarded the fact that I didn't know one traditional dance step. FUN!

5) What are some other examples of stories you profiled that inspire you?

I am awed by the illiterate grandmothers in India who spend six months learning to be Barefoot Solar Engineers, then bring light to their dark villages, which

changes everything. And they return to the Barefoot College to teach solar engineering to women the UN sends to India from all over the developing world. Never mind that the teachers and students have no common language, they teach with demonstration, gesture and color-coding!

Grandmother Power includes stories of grandmothers who are passionately pursuing social justice for many years, and against great odds. Three examples:

*The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina have been searching for (and finding) their grandchildren who were abducted by the military dictatorship in the 1970's and 80's.

*Philippine grandmothers, forced into sex slavery by the Japanese military during World War II, are still working to get reparations, an apology and a place in Japanese history books so sex slavery will not happen again.

*Grandmothers in Senegal are helping their communities reach decisions to abandon long-entrenched, harmful traditions: early marriage, teen pregnancy and female genital mutilation.

The work these grandmothers are doing requires courage, tenacity, and moral clarity. Because I am a grandmother, too, I met these grandmothers as peers—but immediately, they became my heroes.

6) What do you think is the most important message readers should take away from this book?

Today's grandmothers are younger than, better educated than, more professionally experienced than, and (despite the economic downturn) relatively better off than grandmothers have ever been. My dream is that they will ask themselves how they can best use their experience, energy, wisdom and creativity—their power—to create a better future for grandchildren everywhere who deserve to live in a better world.