

Some Facts about Older Women in Canada and sub-Saharan Africa

1. **Growing numbers.** In Canada, the number of older women (age 60-plus) is growing rapidly due to the aging of the population, especially the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964). In 2011, 16% of all Canadians are age 65 and over. More than half (some 3 million) are women. Women live longer than men: in fact, women over age 80 are the fastest growing group in the population.

Populations in developing countries are also aging, although the AIDS pandemic has reduced life expectancy from birth in sub-Saharan Africa. If a young woman survives childhood diseases, childbirth, and situations of conflict and natural emergencies, she is likely to live to quite an old age.

2. **Older women have diverse experiences.** Women born before and during World War II had very different life experiences than Boomer women. Every 10-year cohort brings different experiences and attitudes to what it means to grow older in Canada today. The life experiences of older women in sub-Saharan Africa depend on the country and area they grew up in, their experiences of racism and colonialism, and their opportunities for education, work, economic stability, healthcare, peace and gender equality. Thus, while women in many African countries have been strong advocates for change, their attitudes towards aging, activism and the role of older women in society may vary greatly.
3. **Today's older women are healthier than previous generations.** While over 80% of Canadian women age 65 and over have at least one chronic health condition, this does not slow them down. Over 75% report that they are in good health and full participants in a meaningful life. At the same time, older women are more likely than younger women to face life-threatening illnesses such as cancer, debilitating conditions such as arthritis, and a decline in hearing and vision. In most cases, older women in Canada have ready access to quality healthcare. In sub-Saharan Africa, most older women suffer a number of health problems. Most have poor access to age-friendly healthcare and are usually the last in line to get needed medications.
4. **All over the world, older women are much more likely than older men to live alone** due to widowhood, divorce or choosing not to marry. In Africa, husbands often leave to work in other areas. Maintaining relationships with other family members and friends becomes increasingly important with age since social connectiveness is a critical factor in personal well-being and civic involvement.
5. **Older women are caregivers.** In sub-Saharan Africa, older women have always cared for grandchildren and other family members. The difference now is that because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, many have taken on the primary parenting role. Over 60% of AIDS orphans and other vulnerable children are raised by their grandmothers. Older women in Africa are the backbone of community care for people and families infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

In Canada, many grandmothers provide part-time care for their grandchildren and some 65,000 young Canadians live in grandparent-headed households. Many older women care for sick spouses who tend to be older than them. Almost all go through a period of caring for aging parents. Some are caught in the “sandwich generation”—looking after aging parents and children who still need support. Some are members of the “club sandwich generation” looking after aging parents, adult children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. This support can be physical, financial and emotional—or all of these.

6. **Many older women live on restricted, low incomes.** While less than 3% of older couples in Canada live below the low-income cutoff rate, 16% (about one in six) of women age 65 and older who live alone, have incomes below the poverty line. In sub-Saharan Africa, most older women are poor, and extremely poor in rural areas. Children and husbands leave for jobs in nearby cities. The older women who are left behind spend whatever money they have to care for their grandchildren and to nurse and bury their children who often die from AIDS-related causes. Only a few countries have social security programs (old age pensions) and where they do exist, they are very meager. Grandmothers involved in projects affiliated with the Stephen Lewis Foundation say that they need social security programs, income-generation projects, jobs and business opportunities so they can afford proper housing and be able to send the children in their care to school.
7. **Older women are active volunteers.** In 1998, some 43% of Canadians aged 55 and over (women and men) spent an average 2.2 hours a day as volunteers. The economic value of this is estimated at \$60.2 billion each year.
8. **Many younger grandmothers are still working.** In 2009, women made up 39% of senior workers in Canada, a proportion that is expected to increase in future years. In sub-Saharan Africa, there is no such thing as “retirement”.
9. **Older women often face the double jeopardy of sexism and ageism.** Traditionally, Western societies that celebrate youth and fear aging tend to ignore, patronize and stereotype older women as sexless, fragile, cranky, apolitical, and a burden on the health care system. Older women often say they feel “invisible”.

In some African countries, older women are deprived of their rights to inherit properties and even charged as witches when their husbands and other family members die of AIDS-related causes. It is telling that until 2009, the United Nations and most governments in Africa did not even count people over age 45 when collecting statistics on HIV infection rates.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT www.grannyvoices.com

September 2011