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Being a grandmother is the most exciting thing in the world,' Lady Ashcombe is saying, fork poised over a lunch of elegant 'leftovers' served by staff on crested plates. 'I used to wish that women wouldn't tell me stories about their grandchildren, but when I became a grandmother myself I couldn't wait to get my stories in first.'

As a young widow from America, with Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire to run, she was too busy to enjoy every triumph and cute remark made by her own children, Henry and Mollie Dent-Brocklehurst. 'When you are a mother you are so hands-on you can't really enjoy it,' she says. 'But when it comes back with grandchildren, it is like the prize at the end of the rainbow.'

Like others in her circle, Elizabeth Ashcombe can revel in her four grandsons and one granddaughter. During long summers she watches them all playing together in the courtyard at Sudeley. Hair dye, skin creams, good diet, personal trainers, expert dentistry, cosmetic surgery - all the advantages money can buy - give the developed world's 60-pluses the energy and youthful looks to match the freedom that starts when it is the next generation's turn to hold the baby. Her contemporaries are more likely to discuss their boyfriends than their rheumatism.

But grandmothers in other parts of the world are not so fortunate, she knows. That's why she is trying to help them through Grandmothers United.

The list of GU's supporters reads like a role call of dynamic and glamorous grannies. They include the PR and new-age guru Lynne Franks, the journalist Sue Crewe, the designers Rosie Bartlett and Jane Ormsby-Gore, the writers Candida Lycett-Green and Lucinda Lambton, as well as Jane Fearnley-

'The women's courage and sense of humour were remarkable. They were all making a life for their grandchildren'

Whittingstall (Hugh's garden-designer mother), who found being a grandmother such a life-changing experience that she has published a series of Good Granny guides. These Glamies, as they are calling themselves, are meeting regularly for tea in order to help a very different group of grandmothers on the other side of the world: the gogos of South Africa.

The gogos' worries don't centre on whether little Jake should go to boarding school or if Tara is old enough for a pony. Their concern is more basic: keeping their grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, alive. They aren't just having them to stay for

OLD GIRL NETWORK

Grandmothers in Britain are helping their South African counterparts to give their Aids-orphaned grandchildren a future. By Cassandra Jardine. Photographs by Stan Engelbrecht

Women at the grannies' lunch club in the Khayelitsha township near Cape Town. Their lives are devoted to bringing up their orphaned grandchildren.
the occasional weekend as a treat, the children live with them full-time. With nearly a fifth of the population of South Africa’s poorer communities suffering from HIV or Aids – which many believe to be an underestimate – the children’s parents are often dead or dying. If they are to be spared the orphanage, the gogos must provide a roof to go over the children’s heads and food to fill their stomachs. The burden is one they bear unquestioningly, but it’s heavy.

Two years ago, when a group of gogos and their grandchildren came to stay at Sudeley on a fundraising tour, Ashcombe was deeply impressed by their dignity and stories. When the children sang and danced, mascara ran down many a well-made-up face. But it was the way the gogos slipped half their meals into their handbags that underlined their plight. ‘They were even putting the bread rolls in their pockets to take home,’ Ashcombe says.

Elizabeth Bornside, 82, was one of the women who visited. ‘I was so proud to come to England,’ she says in the perfect English she acquired as a domestic servant. Her home in the township of Nyanga outside Cape Town is tiny, dark and so cold that she wears a blanket under her skirt to keep warm. Suffering from arthritis and a wound in her head from where a drug-crazed grandchild stabbed her, at night she squeezes into a bed with two small children and a bucket to catch the drips that fall through a hole in the roof. Despite all this, she is full of good humour.

‘Sometimes I lie in bed worrying what will happen if I fall sick. I pray that when I die, they all die.’

Jobs are scarce; she fears they will never be able to support themselves. To improve prospects for local children, she used to run a community school in her home, and distributed food parcels. She no longer has the energy for that, but her hope for a better future has been revived, thanks to grandmothers in Britain. Producing some jumpers she has been knitting, she explains that the wool was bought with money from the gammies. ‘Now I’ve got something to do when I’m in my house. And I can teach other women to knit and crochet. That way we can earn some money.’

The two Elizabeths, whose lives would otherwise never have touched, met through a remarkable woman – Priscilla Higham – who is here visiting Mrs Bornside with me. ‘Tell me what you need and I will try to help you,’ she says. Over the past six years she has put that question to hundreds of women, at some risk to herself, because the townships are considered no-go areas for wealthy-looking white women. She finds the vulnerable women through community leaders, such as Baba Velele in Nyanga and Rosie Mashale in Khayelitsha, who are striving to help the young and the sick. ‘Unlike other charitable initiatives,’ she says, ‘we aren’t telling people what to do, we ask what they need. That’s why the charity is called African Solutions to African Problems.’

Asap, which also stands for ‘as soon as possible’, is an apt acronym. The need for help is urgent. Aids has devastated an entire generation
in South Africa and is not expected to peak for another 10 years. Unless something is done now to help the children whose parents are dead or dying, there is every reason to suppose that the horror will continue. Growing up without education or guidance, the young are virtually unemployable. In desperation they turn to drugs, drink and prostitution. 'Girls have unsafe sex just to get a meal,' Higham says. Then they too get infected and the cycle continues.

The message that Higham has been spreading among her friends is that the best way to break that cycle is by helping the gogos. She is a grandmother herself – photographs of her daughter's two small children are pinned up around her office – so she understands the gogos' absolute commitment to their descendants. Two years ago, after a fundraising lunch in London, she invited two fellow grandmothers who showed interest (Sue Crewe and Lady Ashcombe) to meet the people she was helping. The House & Garden editor and the chatelaine of Ashcombe (for the Telegraph Magazine of women) introduced free primary education – as well as listing everything down to 20 rand (£1.35) change – that I knew we were on to something. It spread like a bushfire. I started with one group, now I have six: four in the Eastern Cape, two in the townships of Nyanga and Khayelitsha near Cape Town. Last year Asap reached 8,500 children through 585 groups. It is a seven-year cycle to get these groups self-supporting. The first group has grown to have its own office and computer and is supporting 3,000 children through school. We are spending £211,000 a year and many more groups are asking for help.

Although the South African government has introduced free primary education – as well as pensions – many children still aren't benefiting because they don't have the necessary shoes, uniforms, paper and pens. Sometimes they are just too hungry to walk long distances to school. Higham's desk is piled with neatly filed requests.
for funding, touching in their modesty. 'Father unknown, mother sick, helped needed: garden seeds, tracksuits, shoes,' one says. 'Immediate help sought for childr\'s bedding,' another says. 'New cooking pot required,' is written on a third.

In rural areas, lack of food is a pressing problem, so she also buys seed and trains women to grow vegetables. The labour involved in logging and monitoring each tiny grant is huge. 'It takes as much time to monitor €20 as €20,000,' Higham says, who now has two women, a South African and a Zimbabwean, working with her. 'If you give vegetables you have to ask children when they are eating them and how often. Much charitable giving is irresponsible because the money isn\'t properly tracked. I do find leaks. I pulled out of one group because there were too many leaks.'

The townships present slightly different problems. As in the rural areas, there are few men: they are either away working or dead from disease, violence or overwork. But unlike the rural areas, there aren\'t extended family networks to care for orphans either because, historically, only workers could live in the townships. Nor is there room among the tightly packed houses to grow food. The hunger is shocking. On an Asap-sponsored day out for children from Nyanga, there was pandemonium as they climbed over one another to reach Spam sandwiches, and chicken legs were consumed bones and all. The grandmothers who care for these 'child-headed families' do their best to provide, but it\'s lonely, worrying work.

The gogos\' best emotional support is each other, but it\'s hard for them to meet. Community centres are scarce because gatherings used to be discouraged under apartheid. Down the road from an Aids hospice in Khayelitsha, however, a local activist, Rosie Mashale, has found a room where Higham has started a regular gogo\'s lunch club. Today, despite drenching rain, 14 have come, dressed for a party. While some chop and cook, others discuss their combined total of 86 grand- and great-grandchildren.

When their own children were young, they say, they had little time to nurture them as they worked long hours caring for white families. 'I used to shut mine in the house for 12 hours at a time,' one says. Much of the current social breakdown and spread of disease, they believe, results from this enforced neglect. 'These days people don\'t marry before they have children,' 62-year-old Mavis Goni says sadly. 'And still the men won\'t use condoms.'

The women talk obliquely of 'the virus', or attribute deaths to TB, which is indeed often the immediate cause as immune systems are weakened by HIV. Despite Nelson Mandela\'s plea for more openness about Aids in 2004, after his brother died of the disease, it remains a source of shame. Aids clinics and education initiatives are still relatively new, and few attend because of the stigma. Those who do seek help often get only Panadol, not retroviral drugs. When supplies are available, sufferers commonly share out the medication, not realising that this renders it useless.

As lunch is served, Higham prepares to leave. 'I admire you so much for looking after your grandchildren,' she says. 'I hope your wisdom gets passed on to them.' After lunch, much of which they will take home for their dependants, she asks them to discuss how microloans could best help them earn money to supplement their pensions. The women have handicraft skills that could be passed on to younger people, but often they can\'t use them because they don\'t have the money for a sewing machine - or glasses to see as they crochet.

Back in the smart drawing-rooms of Britain, the glammies are eager to help. It was the photographer Bee Gilbert who originally came up with the idea of fundraising tea-parties two years ago. Having heard from Higham about the gogos, she asked herself. 'What\'s the most granny thing we can do?' This year Ashcombe took over and decided to raise the stakes. 'We\'ll keep the glammies\' tea parties,' she says. 'But I want to widen the net. On October 22, at a glammies tea party at Vogue House, we are launching Grandmothers United. I have a vision of a pyramid of glammies all over the world, paying a joining fee of £100, after which they can host tea parties and come to events. The idea is to celebrate being a grandmother - and help the gogos whose grandchildren are just as precious to them as ours are to us.'

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