

**Heading**

Gogos Go for Gold: Gathering for health, family and community through sports

**Organisation**

Hillcrest AIDS Centre Trust (HACT)

**Country**

South Africa

**Authors**

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Grandmothers, Gogoolympics, Women empowerment, Support groups

Agency and Empowerment,  
Empowerment of Women and Girls in and through PEPAS  
Intersectionality (Intersections of Discrimination by Race,  
Ethnicity, Religion Nationality, Migration, Sexuality, Age  
and Gender),  
Mental and Physical Health and Wellbeing

**Summary/overview**

Founded in 1990, the Hillcrest AIDS Centre Trust (HACT) is dedicated to saving and transforming lives. As one of the first non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in South Africa to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, HACT has established a reputation for making a significant and meaningful impact in the lives of people impacted by the disease.

While HACT's work and services continues to grow throughout KwaZulu-Natal, they primarily focus on serving the semi-rural and disadvantaged communities of the Valley of 1000 Hills region of KwaZulu-Natal, one of the epicentres of the global HIV/AIDS epidemic with HIV infection rates of up to 40% - more than double the current national average of 19%.

HACT's Gogo (isiZulu term for Grandmother) Support Groups programme provides psychosocial support as well as practical and sustainable skills development, training and economic empowerment opportunities to over 2000 Gogos through a network of over 60 support groups across 12 rural communities.

Mainly as a consequence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, many of these Gogos are caring for their orphaned and vulnerable grandchildren and are in dire need of emotional as well as financial support.

HACT focusses on working alongside these Gogos to find practical and sustainable solutions to the challenges they experience on a daily basis all the while, acknowledging the honour and privilege it is to serve these remarkable women who are the backbone of their families and communities.

## **Problem statement**

Gender equality for elderly women in South Africa is an important but often overlooked issue. Older women face discrimination and marginalization based on their age and gender which can exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Traditional gender roles and cultural norms often reinforce inequalities and restrict the autonomy of older and elderly women, making it difficult for them to assert their rights and participate fully in society. These factors intersect to create barriers to equality and well-being and can also increase risk and vulnerability. Rural areas in South Africa, including the province of KwaZulu-Natal, often face high levels of poverty, gender based violence (GBV) and limited access to resources including sports facilities and sporting opportunities.

Grandmothers play an important role in shouldering the burden of the AIDS pandemic, often parenting grandchildren following the loss of their own children. Grandmothers taking care of grandchildren (and great-grandchildren) often struggle to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Many of them are also unable to access formal employment due to factors such as age and lack of education, further exacerbating their economic vulnerability and risk factors to safety, opportunities and access to services and supportive infrastructure. Traditionally, especially in more rural areas, grandmothers are also not expected nor encouraged to engage in sports and physical training for personal enjoyment, physical wellbeing, mental health and social agency.

## **Article/ About the Programme**

Hillcrest AIDS Centre Trust's Gogo Support Group programme was started 18 years ago, in 2006, by a local Nurse, Cwengi Myeni, (Ma Cwengi) who is now over 80 years but is still active in her community, continuing to gather Gogos together for peer support and women's empowerment activities. This programme was born out of both a need and a passion, after Ma Cwengi attended an international gathering of grandmothers where it was highlighted that grandmothers across the African continent were shouldering the heavy burden of the AIDS pandemic. Despite their own age, challenging health, and socio-economic conditions, grandmothers were needing to parent another generation, often surviving on meagre pensions and dealing with the psychological trauma of losing their children from HIV and AIDS. Against this backdrop, HACT's Gogo Support Group programme was born.

The Gogo Support Group programme initially aimed to provide psycho-social peer-to-peer support for grandmothers as they came together to share, pray, grieve, brainstorm about how to improve their household incomes and adjust to being primary caregivers again to new generation. The importance of holistic health became evident as these elderly women were pillars of support for their families and their communities and needed to strengthen their resiliency-physically, socially, emotionally, spiritually and financially. In addition to HIV awareness and prevention, grandmothers also wanted to feel prepared and stronger to cope with and address their realities.

Coming together as Gogos for sports training and activities has helped create a community, supporting their mental health, helped to minimize the effects of chronic health issues and also provide an opportunity to connect socially and share details of their daily lives. In line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) for 2030, which aims to "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages," HACT's Gogo Support Groups are designed around a holistic and life-course approach.

The success of these physical exercise sessions led to the creation of the local Gogolympics in 2011. This event was designed to unite grandmothers, both able and not-so-able, from multiple communities to compete, celebrate, and collaborate in the spirit of sports and empowerment

### **Specific Challenges**

The communities that the Gogo Support Group programme engages have high levels of poverty, unemployment, school attrition, GBV and a high-burden of HIV/STIs, substance abuse and early pregnancy. Some communities have an HIV prevalence of over 40%, more than double the national average and where orphanhood and child vulnerability is extreme. There is a strong embedded culture of imbalanced power dynamics, gender relations and rife GBV that is prevalent within our local communities. Grandmothers are at an increased risk of experiencing various forms of GBV, including physical, sexual, psychological, and financial abuse.

### **Successes**

The programme draws from strength-based and sustainable community partnerships with HACT to support grandmothers and to strengthen outcomes for community members throughout their life-course. The grandmother network has grown to over 1500 grandmothers from across 13 communities who are caring for their 8000 orphaned and vulnerable grandchildren in a region of the KwaZulu-Natal province called the Valley of 1000 Hills. For nearly two decades, HACT's Gogo Support Group programme has been focused on psycho-social support, skills development and training, health awareness (including HIV/GBV/STI/TB prevention), improved food security, family and economic strengthening activities. The programme is facilitated by field officers, and grandmothers themselves, who live within the same communities where services are offered.

Additionally, HACT's facilitated community-based support group meetings provide opportunities for Gogos and their households to undergo HIV risk assessment and GBV screening, financial literacy training, parenting support and family strengthening skills, peer-to-peer learning and sharing, linkages to care as well as support services, all of which contribute to improved health outcomes and wellbeing. Grandmother-headed households are encouraged to strengthen intergenerational family connections in order to mitigate risks and to cultivate caring and trusting relationships within vulnerable families. Additionally, Gogos have been mobilized to advocate for their rights as women and for better services that meet their needs and the needs of their grandchildren. From the success of the support groups, HACT has been instrumental in the development of the Grandmother Movement of South Africa, which now has representation across nearly all 9 provinces.

### **Lessons**

1. Older and elderly women are a unique demographic and a group which require specialized and contextual programmes and services which meet their multiple and intersecting needs and advocacy for improved access, resources and awareness.
2. Engaging older and elderly women in sports and physical activity can be a powerful tool for empowerment, promoting physical health, social connection, self-esteem and creating a community of support

3. These initiatives can also provide opportunities for leadership, skill development, economic strengthening and community engagement, enhancing the overall well-being of older and elderly women. Developing strength-based practices and fostering community partnerships are crucial for facilitating opportunities for agency and ownership.
4. GBV prevention and management strategies should take a life-course approach and be inclusive of older and elderly women, ensuring that they have access to support services, legal assistance, and safe spaces. Efforts to combat GBV should address the specific vulnerabilities faced by women as they age within their local contexts and unique communities.
5. It is essential to promote awareness, advocate for policy change, and implement targeted interventions that prioritize the rights and well-being of elderly women in South Africa.

## Resources

1. Sonke Gender Justice (South Africa's National Strategic Plan including GBV): <https://genderjustice.org.za/knownyourself/#:~:text=The%20NSP%2DGBVF%20Pillars&text=This%20pillar%20makes%20sure%20government,to%20you%20and%20your%20neighbourhood>
2. Understanding older peoples' chronic disease self-management practices and challenges in the context of grandchildren caregiving: A qualitative study in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa: <https://journals.plos.org/globalpublichealth/article?id=10.1371/journal.pgph.0000895>
3. Context Matters: Grandmothers in South Africa and the United States: The Gerontologist, Volume 56, Issue1, February 2016, Pages 164–167, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnv679>

## References

1. South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey, 2017: <chromeextension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/10779/SABSSM%20V.pdf>
2. Hillcrest AIDS Centre Trust: <https://www.hillaims.org.za/what-we-do/hiv-support-family-strengthening/>
3. Grandmothers to Grandmothers (Stephen Lewis Foundation, resource partner of HACT): <https://grandmotherscampaign.org/>
4. Grandmother's Movement of South Africa: <https://gmisa.org.za/>
5. Blanche Moila gsport: <https://gsport.co.za/trailblazer-blanche-moila-inducted-into-the-gsport-hall-of-fame/>