



## ILANA LANDSBERG-LEWIS International Development

**CHAMPIONING women's rights as  
human rights**

**2009 YWCA Woman of Distinction**



**Ilana Landsberg-Lewis** has devoted her career to bettering the lives of women and she is a passionate advocate for human rights. She has captured the imagination of people across Canada and the hope of grandmothers around the world. **Ilana Landsberg-Lewis** is the 2009 YWCA Woman of Distinction for International Development.

Ilana could have followed a conventional path as a bright young lawyer, but instead she chose a life devoted to internationalism and women's equality. As a law student at Parkdale Legal Aid Clinic, she founded a support group for domestic workers. Later, at the firm Ryder, Whitaker, Wright, she practiced union-side labour law and discrimination human-rights law.

In 1993, Ilana made her first foray into international development when she volunteered at the Vienna International Conference on Human Rights, and worked with activists to bring the voices of abuse victims to the attention of delegates. She worked with The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and was an advisor on the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to advance the human rights of women internationally, and to strengthen the United Nations support for CEDAW. As the women's rights programme officer at UNIFEM, she travelled the world working with grassroots women's groups to address female genital mutilation, gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination against women.

As a program officer at UNIFEM, Ilana was aware that gay and lesbian workers in the United Nations civil service had no legal rights and many lived in fear and secrecy. She helped found UN GLOBE (Gay, Lesbian Or Bisexual Employees), and gained a charter as a recognized UN club. She met with the Secretary General and Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson to press for equal rights, and under her leadership the membership in the club increased to 100.

In 2003, Ilana returned to Toronto to help her father establish the Stephen Lewis Foundation where she put her feminist vision into practice by shaping the ideas, goals and practices of this successful organization dedicated to helping turn the tide of HIV/AIDS in Africa. Currently the Executive Director of the Foundation, in the past five years she has grown the organization to include 23 full-time employees in Canada, assisted by a team of Field Representatives in Africa.

She has fostered a working environment where every voice is equally respected, and this respect and trust is something she has also fostered with the African AIDS activists, insisting on treating

them as the experts. This approach has been so successful that other donor agencies have taken note and activists praise the Stephen Lewis Foundation as the agency that really “gets it”. In the last five years, the Foundation has raised over \$30 million and supported more than 300 community-based projects in 15 African countries, to help women, grandmothers and children living with HIV and AIDS.

Ilana is the architect behind the groundbreaking Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign in support of tens of thousands of African grandmothers struggling to care for AIDS orphans. She brought 100 African grandmothers from villages in 11 countries to Toronto for a three-day Grandmothers’ Gathering at which the African women led workshops and taught the 200 Canadian grandmothers about their challenges and needs. This unprecedented event was featured on the major mainstream news and has developed into a movement in Canada involving over 5,000 grandmothers.

**Ilana Landsberg-Lewis** is fiercely dedicated to the lives of the women and girls she serves. Her lifelong commitment to equity, social justice, racial inclusiveness and progressive causes is evident in every step of her personal and professional path.

The daughter of Woman of Distinction Michele Landsberg, (Communications, 1983), and former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa Stephen Lewis, Ms. Landsberg-Lewis makes her home in Toronto with her partner and two sons.