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Breaking Free: Addressing Gender and Sexual Diversity in Communities Through Transdisciplinary Education

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Gender and sexuality issues remain taboo in many communities across the globe. This notion of taboo creates misunderstandings that eventually lead to stigma, discrimination, and violence against that which we do not understand or view as “abnormal.” Communities globally, have experienced the deadly consequences of ignoring the ways in which pandemics like HIV and Covid-19 thrive on inequality, discrimination, and social and economic marginalisation. Our local struggles for health and rights are globally linked and we must work together in all spheres of life towards our well-being and human rights. In line with this, we have to acknowledge the many struggles against the shackles of patriarchy and heteronormativity. In South Africa, these struggles for freedom include fights against homophobia, transphobia, gender-based violence, xenophobia, corrective rape, and violence against sexually nonconforming people. Stigma, discrimination, and violence against LGBTQI+ communities create dangerous barriers to healthcare and social services including HIV prevention, testing, and treatment. As the world faces another surge in human rights violations, it is imperative that communities provide vital health and legal support while advocating for inclusive communities. There is a need to build extensive peer networks that allow us to reach and support the community members who are most vulnerable to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to ensure that all infected people have the support they need to adhere to HIV treatment during this global crisis.

This special issue comes at an opportune time—after South Africa celebrates two very important days in her calendar: Human Rights Day on 21 March and Freedom Day on 27 April. Despite these momentous celebratory days, there have been several instances in which people’s human rights and freedoms have been sabotaged by those who believe that their rights supersede those of others. In many South African townships, there have been cases of unrest and xenophobia-related attacks on Black foreign nationals by members of the Operation Dudula movement. Members of this movement argue that they want to rid South Africa of foreign nationals who are allegedly the ringleaders of crime syndicates and lawlessness in their communities. Although illegal immigrants to South Africa or any other country may cause problems, vigilante movements such as Operation Dudula target only Black foreign nationals in their “sweepings” of the country. This is a clear example of economic exclusion because the Black foreign nationals who are targeted are on the periphery of society and many of them have nothing to their names. They live in the townships because these are the only places in which they can find refuge; those who have the means, live in South African suburbs out of reach of Operation Dudula. To make matters worse, the province of KwaZulu-Natal has recently endured unprecedented storms that have caused major infrastructure and environmental devastation with hundreds of lives lost.

Notwithstanding the challenges in South Africa, Black people were also discriminated against in the services offered to people fleeing the war between Russia and Ukraine. Thus, I ask, “What does breaking free mean in the context of Black-on-Black hatred and violence, racial discrimination and xenophobia, and Operation Dudula in South Africa?” “Are African refugees as human as Ukrainian refugees?” “Who is human, and whose rights should be celebrated?” “Are there some people whose humanity surpasses others?” “Are there people who are less human—whose rights do not matter?” “What do we mean by celebrating human rights amidst all the abuses of women, children, and those on the periphery of society, those who do not look like us, those who have different beliefs to our own?” “How long will we keep using ‘them’ and ‘us’ to divide humanity?” “When will the sexual health and reproductive rights of marginalised people be celebrated as human rights?” “When will the rights of the poor become human rights?” “Are human rights greater than environmental rights and ecological rights?” “Can humanity survive without the ecosystem?” “Can we celebrate humanity without celebrating all life forms and their support systems?” “Do human rights exist in unethical business and development?” I know I have asked too many questions, and the truth is that I have no answers to them yet.

However, as you ponder your responses to my questions, this special issue of *Educational Research for Social Change* engages in timely and compelling conversations about the role of global solidarity in championing health and human rights for all. It brings together diverse perspectives from academics, activists, community members, and students on how we can promote a sex-positive and norm-critical world beyond 2030. Driving change in educational institutions and communities requires new paradigms and novel approaches for transformative change. In these uncertain times, this demands new ways of being and doing, a nonlinear theory of change, and paradigms related to complexity and intersectionality. Working in these new paradigms and approaches unlocks shared rethinking and envisioning of the future we want—a breaking free from the shackles of patriarchy and heteronormativity. It is therefore imperative for academics, academic leaders, academic development professionals, and students to constantly engage in creative and innovative ways to transform learning and teaching organically and systematically towards inclusive and equal communities.

The issue’s first article, by Jace Pillay, “A Scoping Review of Learners’ Perceptions on What Influences Teachers’ Approaches to Teaching Comprehensive Sexuality Education in South African Schools,” presents an overview of studies conducted in comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) classrooms in South Africa—focussing on the voices of learners regarding their experience of CSE as a subject and how it is taught compared to what they want to learn. Pillay conducted a scoping review of learners’ perceptions of what influences their teachers’ approach to teaching CSE in South Africa. He used qualitative study articles (published from January 2010 till May 2021) with an explicit focus on learner feedback on their perceptions of influences to teachers teaching CSE. He identified three major themes: an inherent bias towards heterosexuality as normal and natural, the belief that learners need to be taught to uphold culturally dictated normative gender roles, and avoidance of subject matter relating to the LGBTQI+ community influenced by beliefs that limited interactions would lead to limited gender and sexual fluidity. He thus concluded that transformative communication needed to take place to update the curriculum to create a space for *all* learners to learn about healthier life choices.

Ashnie Mahadew and Dipane Hlalele’s article, “Challenging Gender Certainties in Early Childhood Care and Education: A Participatory Action Learning and Action Research Study,” places the reader in the early childhood classroom to explore how dominant ideologies about gender can be challenged within communities, beginning with the youngest community members. They report on a virtual participatory action learning and action research study with six teachers and two teacher trainers using a baseline questionnaire, photovoice, reflective journals, and purposeful conversations. Their findings revealed that teachers were not clear on gender binary, heterosexuality as a dominant ideology, and gender

stereotyping. However, through their participation in the study, the teachers' perceptions were challenged towards transformed views regarding gender certainties. These authors, therefore, argue that starting with early childhood education could promote positive societal impact and transformation against stereotypic gender roles and identities.

In the third article, "Teaching for Comfort or Diversity in Comprehensive Sexuality Education Classrooms? Third-Year Student Teachers' Perspectives," Mathabo Khau discusses sexual rights within disability as a neglected and underdeveloped terrain in the human rights discourse worldwide, especially when addressing adolescent sexuality. She argues that constructing adolescents as sexually innocent, asexual, or lacking sexual agency denies them their sexual autonomy, thus placing them at risk of sexual exploitation and harm. She employed theatre-in-education processes to explore student teachers' understandings and perceptions of teaching sexuality education to learners with visual impairment. Her findings indicate that the student teachers resorted to their comfort zones in designing their lessons in line with their socialisation. However, their understandings and perceptions of using teaching aids to teach sexuality education were challenged and deconstructed through their theatre-in-education processes, thus highlighting the importance of engaged scholarship in deconstructing harmful norms towards transformative pedagogies.

Continuing the discussion on CSE in classrooms, Rauna Haitembu and Rouaan Maarman discuss the "Treatment of Gender-Nonconforming Learners in Namibian Schools." Their aim was to explore the context of Namibia and how gender-nonconforming learners were treated within the schooling spaces and education system. They employed a case study design as a transformative research method informed by the social identity perspective. They found that societal, religious, and cultural beliefs in schools were determinants of how gender-nonconforming learners were treated in some schools. Thus, gender-nonconforming learners were mistreated in some schools while in others, these learners were accepted into friendship groups and class activities by teachers and other learners. Based on their findings, they argue for the open discussion of sex education topics during life skills lessons, the creation of supportive learning environments, the establishment of anti-bullying policies with specific measures on curbing homophobic bullying, and the strengthening of psychological support to learners.

Taking a more upbeat stance, Azra Rajah's article, "I'm a 'Savage': Exploring Megan Thee Stallion's Use of the Politics of Articulation to Subvert the Androcentric Discourses of Women in Hip Hop Culture," discusses the use of hip hop music as a tool for promoting equality amongst those previously marginalised and discriminated against. Her aim was to discuss how research on women in hip hop culture has focused on misogyny and hypersexualising of women. Using Fairclough's model of critical discourse analysis as a lens and tool to introduce alternative perspectives on these discourses and ideologies, she interrogates how Megan Thee Stallion applies the politics of articulation in her rap lyrics to subvert the androcentric discourses of hip hop culture that objectify and sexually exploit Black women who have historically been positioned as inferior to White women.

The last article takes the reader back in time to the history of Lesotho and Chief Mohlomi. In their article, "Rethinking Constructions of Difference: Lessons From Lesotho's Chief Mohlomi's Activism Against the Gendering of Witchcraft," Khali Mofuoa and Mathabo Khau present arguments regarding how witchcraft has historically been negatively skewed against women, with women's gender and sexual diversity being used against them in accusations of witchcraft. Their aim was to centre issues of gender and sexual diversity within witchcraft discourses to explain how these have been used in communities to discriminate against deviant individuals. Employing life-history narratives with 10 elderly Basotho people, they brought forth historical lessons regarding constructions of difference as witchcraft and Chief Mohlomi's activism against the discrimination of those labelled as witches. Their findings reveal that divergent gender and sexual characteristics and identities were used in labelling

certain individuals as witches and unexplainable phenomena as witchcraft. They also show how Chief Mohlomi initiated activism against the persecution of divergent people through his teachings, which led to transformed views on gender and sexual diversity among the Basotho. Thus, this article shows the importance of learning from the past to shape a better and inclusive future and sustainable communities.

The book reviewed in this issue is *Women and Fairness: Navigating an Unfair World*, edited by Eva Lambertsson Björk, Jutta Eschenbach, and Johanna Wagner. According to Mathabo Khau, the book comes at an opportune time when the world needed to rethink its stance towards gender equality and the equitable treatment of all who inhabit it. Presenting stories of a gender-unequal world, this book highlights how women from different spheres of life have navigated their being and becoming while challenging heteropatriarchal norms and standards. If you have not read this book, get yourself a copy. You may find resonances with your own lived experiences and appreciate the fact that your story is also worth telling. Khau argues that the book highlights the fact that it is in the telling and retelling of our stories that we can learn what worked and what has not served us in our journey of life. Although life experiences may not be the same, people are motivated by learning about other people's struggles and achievements and use them as tools for their own lives. This book would be a useful resource for students, academics, researchers, and advocacy and activist groups interested in gender equality and women's studies. It provides a refreshing insight into how women navigate their life paths in an unfair world.

This special issue ends with a report on an online Southern African-Nordic Centre (SANORD) conference hosted by the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences and the University of Bergen on 7–10 September 2021, with the theme, *Vitalizing Partnerships: Moving Forward to a Sustainable Future*. Mathabo Khau reports that 130 abstracts were accepted for presentation, and more than 400 participants engaged in the conference proceedings. The conference delegates were reminded that they have the power to make a difference by engaging the diversity of stakeholders in their spaces. The conference theme allowed participants the flexibility to challenge traditional thinking around sustainable development and education's role in promoting sustainable economies by exploring new paradigms and approaches necessary for transforming our world into a sustainable space. The uncertainties of the Covid-19 pandemic demand new perspectives, ways of being and doing, and theorisation towards preserving our livelihoods. Thus, by focussing on new ways of being and doing, the conference presentations provided insights into how academics, researchers, community members, and policy makers can reimagine sustainable futures for all. Participants engaged in robust and scholarly discussions and presentations that challenged and disrupted their thinking around how the South–North partnerships could be revitalised towards sustainability in all spheres of life. By engaging in dissemination of ideas and research on trans-geographic and transdisciplinary innovations and responses to global challenges, the SANORD 2021 conference highlighted the critical role of collaboration in creating a revitalised world.

I know that reading this special issue will not address our human rights challenges and infringements on people's freedoms, but it will provide the reader with some interesting insights on how the world could work together and learn from each other to advocate for inclusive communities that celebrate diversity. It may even help some readers find answers to the questions I have asked herein.