

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk

A professional journal for the social worker

Vol. 59, No. 4, 2023



Doi: <https://doi.org/10.15270/59-4-1180>

w: <https://socialwork.journals.ac.za/pub> e: socialwork@sun.ac.za eISSN: 2312-7198 (online)

BOOK REVIEW

Simon Murote Kang'ethe

Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha Campus, Department of Social Work, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9150-0235>  skangethe@wsu.ac.za

Editors: Vishanthie Sewpaul, Linda Kreitzer and Tanusha Raniga (2021). *The tensions between culture and human rights: Emancipatory social work and Afrocentricity in a global world*. ISSN 1703-1826. Pages 312

Although this collection foregrounds an interplay between Afrocentrism and emancipatory social work, virtually all the chapters unequivocally challenge social workers to fight the harmful cultural processes that pose serious human rights violations. These inter alia include female genital mutilation, female ritual bondage, etc. All the chapters have cogently addressed the tensions between cultural practices and human rights. But it needs to be pointed out that the human rights context used is hegemonically Western-centric rather than Afrocentric. This presents a glaring lacuna that may impede the process of indigenisation and decoloniality in Africa.

In the book's introduction, the contributors lament the pain that cultural practices continue to inflict especially on women and girlchildren. They acknowledge the role of forces of colonialism and Eurocentrism in destroying cultures, dispossessing people of their lands, and fragmenting their families, etc. However, this chapter presents some paradoxical thinking in that while the detrimental impact on culture is lamented, it is the need to change many cultures that will offer relief to many of the human rights violations. Perhaps the chapter could also have indicated that some of the forces of Eurocentrism, such as education, have also played a role not only in modifying cultures but also in reducing most of the harmful aspects of culture. However, the contributors propose the adoption of the principles of Afrocentricity such as Ubuntu to stem the abuse of human rights in the name of culture.

Chapter 1 discusses the role of emancipatory social work in nurturing human rights and social justice. The contributors aver that the practice of paying bridewealth among many Southern African tribal groupings can raise cultural tensions, as those who pay for it tend to undermine women's dignity, and self-determination, and thereby promote *malignant sexism*. Perhaps the downside of the custom of paying bridewealth is that many men lack the resources to marry (Yarborough, 2017). As cultural mediators, social workers should stage constructive confrontations against the imposition of bridewealth (Sewpaul & Larsen, 2014).

Chapter 2 discusses the Yoruba widowhood rituals that are dehumanising, as they take away widows' rights to self-determination when they are disinherited by their brothers-in-law (Akinbi, 2015). This goes against both African and global human rights for women.

Chapter 3 discusses the experiences of domestic workers who are forced, on account of their economic circumstances, to parent from a distance (Macleod, 2001). This is not in the best interests of the child, as well as is painful for the mothers themselves, especially when their children do not behave well (Macleod, 2001). Furthermore, mothering from afar culturally undermines the woman's self-esteem and dignity. The contributors lament that these vulnerable mothers tend to be othered and stigmatised, as they mother outside the constructs of ideal motherhood, while women who choose not to be mothers or postpone motherhood are often pathologized. In addition, child nurturance from afar is an important precursor to, and consequence of, teenage pregnancy, as well as being a recipe for single mothers' mental illnesses (Ntini & Sewpaul, 2017).

Perhaps the chapter could have acknowledged the mothers, albeit a few in number, who do not want to get married and perhaps date freely, but choose to remain single and free, and are economically able to support their children alone with success. Social workers adhering to the tenets of Eurocentrism need to engage the government and NGOs to chart the way forward to protect domestic workers to have and raise their children with the dignity they deserve.

Chapter 4 discusses the human rights deficits faced by people living with epilepsy in Zimbabwe who suffer stigma, isolation, and apathy, making it difficult for them to develop social networks, education, training, and employment amid their greater risk of brain injury and cerebral infection (World Health Organisation, 2016). However, serious tensions and paradoxes abound between the religious treatment modalities and those offered by biomedical practitioners. These belief systems also pose a human rights challenge, especially when the epileptic does not trust the biomedical practitioners, and yet the faith they possess in supernatural forces fails to heal them. This calls for the social workers to engage the epileptic and their caregivers in open debate and dialogue on various treatment modalities.

Chapter 5, within the context of Ghana, and emphasized by the United Nations Development Programme (2007), reinforces the discussions in Chapter 2 on the culture of widowhood that humiliates and dehumanises them. Paradoxically, the widower undergoes a less punitive experience. This represents gross gender discrimination. The chapter also discusses the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) that exposes women/girls to severe medical risks that violate their rights. It can sometimes be fatal and is practised in girl children and not boys (World Health Organization, 2018). Short-term complications of FGM include inter alia severe pain, injury to the surrounding genital tissue, urinary problems, and haemorrhaging, which can even lead to death, while long-term complications inter alia include difficulties with urination and menstruation, painful sexual intercourse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (UNICEF, 2011).

Another cultural practice prevalent among the Ewe and Ga ethnic groupings of Ghana is called *troxovi*, or female ritual bondage, and entails the belief that female virgins (*Trokosi*) must be dedicated to a deity in atonement for crimes committed by a family member to prevent the

anger of the deity from destroying the family through sickness, death, and other calamities (Nukunya, 2003). The chapter also discusses the offense of child marriage which strips the girl child of her rights to self-determination as well as her opportunity to advance in schooling and build her future. This reviewer further thinks that social workers should urgently facilitate Afrocentric approaches such as community dialogues and the principles of *Ubuntu* in the hope of changing the mindset of the indigenes towards these harmful practices (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020)

Chapter 6 highlights that the interplay of culture and Islamic religion in Ethiopia, strengthened by patriarchy, stifles the rights of women. For example, a man does not need the consent of the first wife to marry again. While this poses a human rights deficit, it is paradoxical that widowed, divorced, and relatively older women find comfort in getting married as second wives. Another travesty of justice against women is denying or discouraging women access to education and to work (Syed, 2004). Social workers need to advocate strongly for Ethiopians to embrace the egalitarian value of education for both males and females.

Chapter 7 reveals how patriarchy in the South African context plays out in suppressing the rights of women through domestic violence. All these denials of rights are paradoxically happening despite the rights being enshrined in South Africa's Constitution and the Bill of Rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996). While the threat posed by patriarchy in the *public sphere* in South Africa may be weakening because of the promotion of gender equality in legislation and policy, as well as increased access to opportunities in post-apartheid South Africa, for many women, patriarchy is still rife in the *private sphere*. Social workers need to unleash their repertoire of skills in cultural mediation, negotiation, and facilitating community conversations with especially the traditional leadership where the drivers of domestic violence need to be laid bare. The application of Afrocentric ideals and standards that aim to screen, reform, and restructure is critical.

Chapter 8 presents the way religions operating in tandem with cultures in Zimbabwe continue to deprive girlchildren of their rights by sanctioning child marriages that are likely to inter alia present challenges such as birth complications, high infant and maternal mortality rates, gender-based violence, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (United Nations Population Fund, 2012). This has implications for social work in that these actions are contrary to the principles of social justice, equality, empowerment, and liberty (Muchacha & Matsika, 2017). One suggestion is that the approach to counter these violations adopts predominantly Eurocentric means that fail to get sufficient buy-in from the indigenes. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) views childhood as age-specific, asexual, innocent, and deserving of a special form of care to successfully transition into better adulthood, while a few childhood researchers demonstrate that childhood is context-specific and shaped by local cultures and socioeconomic and political circumstances. Social workers need to advocate for the alignment of international human rights norms and practices with lived realities in Africa.

Chapter 9 reinforces the rights of children, with the authors lamenting that although the government of Ghana's efforts in richly legislating the rights of children, paradoxically an analysis of the legal instruments of child protection suggests that many of the children's rights

and protection laws and policies are poorly coordinated, and the provisions in the Children's Act are not working as envisaged (Manful & Manful, 2014). Perhaps the reason that the enactment of these rights is weak is because of the conflict between the Western-centric and Afrocentric approaches. While the country has followed the Western-centric approaches to children's rights, this creates conflicts with the Afrocentric tradition, where children are recognised as the custodians of tomorrow and society has the responsibility of socialising them in the art of survival and perpetuation (Boakye-Boateng, 2010). Social work interventions such as the staging of community conversations should be enlisted to find a balance between the rights of children within both Western-centric and Afrocentric frames of reference.

Chapter 10 gives an account of human rights and the medicalisation of FGM or cutting in Sudan by underscoring that FGM is rooted in social motivations that do not have any health benefits. Medicalisation of FGM is a situation in which FGM or cutting is practised by any category of healthcare provider, whether in a public or a private clinic, at home, or elsewhere (World Health Organization, 2010). The chapter underscores that FGM, and its medicalisation have socio-cultural, structural and socio-economic drivers that need to be taken into account in sexual reproductive human rights policy and programming aimed at de-medicalisation and abandonment of FGM. Social workers are called upon to engage in behavioural change interventions as well as systematic advocacy for policies and programmes that will address FGM and its medicalisation in Sudan.

Chapter 11 discusses the cultural dimensions of HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence within the context of Alur and Tieng Adhola cultural institutions in Uganda, and notes that the studied communities display both the phenomenon of the feminisation of HIV/AIDS as well as gender-based violence. This is because HIV/AIDS rates are almost four times higher among females than males aged 15-24, and women are more than twice as likely to experience sexual violence from men than the other way around (Ministry of Health Uganda, 2019). Just as in the context of widow inheritance in Ghana and Nigeria discussed in this book, the cultural process of widow inheritance happens without any information about HIV tests. On the other hand, a man who loses a wife can be compensated by marrying the deceased's sister. Furthermore, these two communities display a protracted mourning period that involves people from diverse backgrounds interacting day and night, which situation presents an opportunity for engaging in irrational risky sexual behaviours. The communities are polygamous, practising forced marriages as well as a culture of healing and beautification involving incision of body parts. These all increase the chances of HIV infections.

Chapter 12 discusses corporal punishment in Botswana with the salient finding that such disciplinary practices which are normalised in law and culture are unlikely to be perceived as a threat to children's rights and well-being by society. Corporal punishment is associated inter alia with poor parent-child relations and poor attachment, school dropout, anxiety, depression, aggression, and anti-social behaviours, etc. This means that it will be difficult to resolve the tension between cultural assumptions and human rights if some cultural practices are embedded in the country's laws. The chapter has observed that despite 53 states across the world now banning all forms of corporal punishment in all settings, Botswana rejected the plea from the international community to ban corporal punishment (Global Initiative to End all Corporal

Punishment of Children, 2018). While the chapter is very strong on the need to amend the country's laws to ban the use of corporal punishment, the role of social workers is critical in engaging communities in public education about alternatives to corporal punishment, for example, embracing conscious positive parenting practices and challenging some of the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying corporal punishment.

The concluding chapter discusses emancipatory social work with an emphasis on Afrocentric ideals as antidotes to human rights violations by noting that specific cultural traditions threaten people's rights to dignity, well-being, bodily integrity, security, and life itself. The chapter calls for the application of Afrocentric ideals embedded in *Ubuntu* as a platform for emancipatory social work. The chapter further recommends the need to improve socio-economic environments as some of the harmful practices discussed such as child marriage and FGM have their roots in poverty and ignorance.

REFERENCES

- Akinbi, J. O. 2015. Widowhood practices in some Nigerian societies: A retrospective examination. *International journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 5 (4): 67-74.
- Boakye-Boateng, A. 2010. Changes in the concept of childhood: Implications on children in Ghana. *Journal of international Social Research*, 3(10): 104-115.
- Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children (GIEACPC). 2018. *Corporal punishment of children in Botswana*. [Online] Available: <https://endcorporalpunishment.org/wpcontent/uploads/global/zglobal-report-2017spreads.pdf>.
- Macleod, C. 2001. Teenage motherhood and the regulation of mothering in the scientific literature: The South African example. *Feminism & Psychology*, 11(4): 493-510.
- Manful, E. & Manful, S. E. 2014. Child welfare in Ghana: The relevance of children's rights in practice. *Journal of Social Work*, 14(3): 313-328.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017313477756>
- Ministry of Health Uganda. 2019. *The Ugandan population-based HIV impact assessment 2016-2017*. Kampala, UG.
- Muchacha, M. & Matsika, A. B. 2017. *Developmental social work: A promising practice to better address child marriage in Zimbabwe*. [Online] Available: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s1134-017-0042-3>.
- Mugumbate, J. & Chereni, A. 2020. Now the theory of ubuntu has its space in social work. *African Journal of Social Work*, 10: 5-17.
- Ntini, T. & Sewpaul, V. 2017. School-going teenage mothers and fathers: Gender, challenges, and the negotiation of learner-parent roles. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 76: 250-257.
- Nukunya, G. K. 2003. *Traditions and change in Ghana*. Accra, GH: Ghana Universities Press.

- Republic of South Africa (RSA). 1996. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Government Gazette, Vol. 378, No. 17678. (8 May 1996) Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Sewpaul, V. & Larsen, A. K. 2014. Community development: Towards an integrated emancipatory framework, In: Larsen, A. K., Sewpaul, V. & Oline, G. (eds). *Participation in community work: International perspectives*. London, UK. Routledge.
- Syed, A. 2004. *The position of women in Islam: Progressive view*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- UNICEF. 2011. *Ghana's multiple indicator cluster survey report*. [Online] Accessed: https://www.unicef.org/ghana/Ghana_MICS_Final.pdf.
- United Nations. 1989. *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. New York: UN Department of Public Information.
- United Nations Development Programme. 2007. *Annual report 2007*. New York: UN Department of Public Information.
- United Nations Population Fund. 2012. *Marrying too young*. New York: UN Department of Public Information.
- World Health Organisation. 2010. *Global strategy to stop healthcare providers from performing female genital mutilation*. Geneva, CH: WHO, in partnership with FIGO, ICN, & MWIA. [Online] Available: http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/who_rhr_10-9_en.pdf.
- World Health Organisation. 2016. Epilepsy. [Online] Available: <http://www.who.int/media/centre/factsheets/fs999/en/>.
- World Health Organisation. 2018. *Female genital mutilation fact sheet*. [Online] Available: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheet/fs241/en/>.
- Yarbrough, M. W. 2017. Very long engagements: The persistent authority of bride wealth a post-apartheid South African community. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 43(3): 647-677.