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EDITORIAL

REVISITING THE LEGACY OF ERIKA THERON FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL WORK: *SONDER HOED OF HANDSKOEN* (“WITHOUT HAT OR GLOVES”)

Sixty years have passed since the first issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* was published, with Erika Theron serving as the founding editor. As the journal marks this significant milestone, it is appropriate to reflect on Theron’s legacy. Many scholars from varying ideological perspectives (cf. Barnard, 2000; Collins, 2007; Esterhuyse, 2007; Terreblanche, 1999) have described her as a pioneer of social work in South Africa. A review of past journal issues and literature on Theron’s contributions (cf. Tayler, 2010) reveals that her advocacy for marginalised communities, particularly through her research, offers valuable lessons for contemporary practice in South Africa and beyond. Clear parallels may be drawn between the challenges currently facing social work and the political marginalisation that shaped Theron’s upbringing and professional life. Her socioeconomic and political engagement, along with her influence on the dominant discourses of her time (1907–1990), remains highly relevant. For instance, echoing the challenges of Theron’s era, many social workers today observe that the state, which ought to protect vulnerable populations, has in certain instances become a source of oppression, thereby impeding efforts to advance social justice. This concern is well documented in recent legal cases, public policy debates and academic studies, including those published in *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, which highlight enduring systemic barriers. Building on these insights, the current issue of the journal continues Theron’s legacy by publishing research that engages critically with pressing issues in social work, with relevance for both South African and global contexts.

Erika Theron’s autobiography (1983), *Sonder hoed of handskoen* (Without hat or gloves), bears a profoundly symbolic title that encapsulates both personal and socio-political themes central to her life and work in apartheid-era South Africa. The metaphor “without hat or gloves” evokes a sense of exposure, honesty and vulnerability. In traditional Afrikaner society, hats and gloves connoted formality, decorum and protection, particularly for women. By choosing to present

herself *without* these accessories, Theron signalled a deliberate rejection of social pretence. She embraced an unguarded and authentic identity that was unafraid of scrutiny or criticism. These qualities – openness and moral courage – are enduring ideals for social workers in their advocacy and interventions.

Furthermore, the title signifies a refusal to conform to the rigid social expectations imposed on women and Afrikaner intellectuals during apartheid. As a distinguished social worker and academic, Theron consistently challenged conservative ideologies and entrenched gender roles. Her active involvement in shaping social welfare policy and advocating for human rights placed her in opposition to dominant societal norms, particularly after her political awakening during the apartheid years. Her stance against conformity continues to encourage social workers to confront oppressive structures and challenge unethical practices when addressing social injustices.

The image of working without gloves also conveys a frontline, hands-on approach and a refusal to remain detached from the suffering of others. This interpretation resonates with Theron's commitment to social justice, as evidenced by her extensive work in poverty alleviation and her leadership of the Theron Commission (1973-1976), which investigated the welfare needs of marginalised Coloured communities in South Africa. Her engaged approach to national research – particularly in amplifying silenced voices – remains central to the mission and vision of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*. The journal continues to promote high-quality, original research, especially qualitative methodologies, that provides a platform for discourse on current issues, innovations and advancements in global social work, as well as an account of their practical implications.

In a society marked by patriarchy and racial stratification, it was both unusual and contentious for an Afrikaner woman to assume public intellectual and policy-making roles. By presenting herself without hat or gloves, Theron asserted her autonomy and challenged the gendered expectations of female propriety and silence. The feminist dimensions of her work may continue to inspire social workers to transcend barriers in male-dominated arenas and to resist constraints that undermine their professional recognition and efficacy.

In conclusion, *Sonder hoed of handskoen* captures Erika Theron's courageous position as a social work scholar who confronted systemic injustice with integrity, rejected conservative orthodoxy, and prioritised empathy over convention. Her metaphorical “uncovered hands” extend a compelling invitation to today's social workers to act decisively *within* unjust systems and to ground their practice in practical, community-driven solutions. Theron's legacy calls on the social work profession to resist harmful policies and practices, to challenge repressive ideologies, and to advocate for research-informed and evidence-based reforms that promote social justice and equity – even, as in her case, *from within* their own organisations, systems and institutions.

In this issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* several contributions address some of the most pressing social challenges in South Africa and beyond. These contributions collectively suggest that reforms aimed at promoting social justice and equity – *from within* organisations, systems, and institutions – are vital. Particular emphasis is placed on the wellbeing of older persons,

mental health care users, individuals affected by substance misuse, survivors of gender-based violence, and issues concerning young people.

In the first article **Melanie Human and Ilze Slabbert** explore the marginalisation of older persons, often referred to as a "forgotten generation", despite the global trend of population ageing. Their qualitative study investigates the concept of emotional poverty among older persons residing in residential facilities in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The findings indicate that these individuals frequently experience loneliness, depression and minimal engagement with the broader community, leading to emotional impoverishment. The authors recommend specific improved service provisions to mitigate the impact of these challenges.

The second article by **Portia Webb and Anri Gretha Adlem** examines the challenges faced by social workers in the mental health sector. Employing a phenomenological approach, supported by exploratory, descriptive, contextual and case study designs, the authors reveal that social workers are often inadequately trained for work in mental health care. Moreover, they are burdened with the responsibility of educating service users, their families and the broader community. The authors call on policymakers to develop customised, effective and efficient care interventions for mental health care users.

A similarly urgent concern is addressed by **Azwihangwisi Tshiangwana, Kai J. Jonas and Rob A. C. Ruiter**, who examine the recurrent relapse into *nyaope* use among individuals previously rehabilitated in South Africa. The study employs interpretive phenomenological analysis of face-to-face interviews with thirteen participants from a rehabilitation centre in Tshwane, Gauteng. The findings suggest that neither successful detoxification nor therapy alone ensures sustained abstinence. The authors recommend strengthening existing interventions by integrating specific strategies to prevent relapse following rehabilitation.

Continuing the focus on the experiences of social work service users, **Bongeka Zawani and Marinei Herselman** employ a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected from thirty survivors of gender-based violence in Matatiele, Eastern Cape, using stratified sampling. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews with five social workers selected through purposive sampling. The study highlights how the prioritisation of support services for gender-based violence survivors was undermined during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in inadequate service delivery. The authors advocate for the prioritisation of gender-based violence prevention and response services during public health crises to protect vulnerable populations in times of increased risk.

The current issue also addresses youth-related themes. **Charity Bekunda Rutaremwa and Modjadji Linda Shirindi** explore fathers' perspectives on preparing sons for family responsibilities. Using a qualitative, phenomenological, exploratory, descriptive and contextual design, they conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty Bakiga fathers in Kabale, South-Western Uganda. The study reveals that fathers contribute significantly to their sons' holistic development across emotional, mental, spiritual, social, economic and academic domains. Their preparation includes cultivating supportive relationships, offering both formal and informal education, promoting sound financial practices, and imparting cultural values.

Following the focus on East-Central Africa, attention turns to the Cape Flats in Cape Town, South Africa, where **Glynnis Dykes, Ronel Davids and Uwarren September** report on a qualitative study involving 350 parents. The research investigates parental perceptions regarding the appeal of gang membership among young people. The findings suggest that, although parents are aware of community dynamics, their perspectives are often overlooked in intervention strategies and policy development. The study calls for more inclusive policymaking that takes into account the lived realities of those most affected, ensuring their participation and agency in addressing marginalisation and disempowerment.

Further contributions on young people are presented by **Tsholofelo Shophi and Nopasika Fidelia Maforah**, who explore the lived experiences of street children in Mahikeng, North West province, South Africa. Informed by Erikson's psychosocial theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, their qualitative study identifies a lack of familial support, inadequate access to essential services, poor financial resources and substance misuse as key factors contributing to child homelessness. The authors recommend community-based education initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes that compel children to live on the streets.

In the final article of this issue, **Joyce Hlungwani** examines the contribution of structured opportunities for personal independence to the development of resilience among young people leaving care. Eleven participants were purposively selected from child and youth care centres across South Africa. A qualitative, exploratory approach informed the study design. The findings affirm that strengthening preparatory practices – particularly through managed opportunities for autonomy – is essential for enhancing resilience and improving outcomes for care leavers.

In the book review section, **Nyasha Hillary Chibaya** critically engages with *Social Work in the 21st Century: Scholarship and praxis reimagined towards vulnerability*, edited by **Allucia Shokane, Annaline Keet and Varoshini Nadesan**. This open access publication provides a pertinent and reflective analysis of the changing role of social work in responding to vulnerability. It urges practitioners to move beyond addressing immediate individual concerns and to confront the wider systemic and structural forces that contribute to such conditions.

The articles and book review included in this issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, dedicated to honouring the legacy of Erika Theron, reflect a candid and earnest engagement with pressing societal realities and the contributions of the social work profession. These contributions address deeply entrenched social issues without evasion or embellishment, offering empirically grounded research while advocating for meaningful reform. May the legacy of *sonder hoed of handskoen* (without hat or gloves) continue to inspire a critical and courageous social work praxis.

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Editor-in-Chief

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