

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk

A professional journal for the social worker

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

Vol. 61, No. 2, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15270/61-2-1646>

BOOK REVIEW

Nyasha Hillary Chibaya

Stellenbosch University, Department of Social Work, Stellenbosch, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1830-7185>  hchibaya@sun.ac.za

Shokane, A. L., Keet, A., & Nadesan, V. (Eds). (2024). *Social work in the 21st century: Scholarship and praxis reimagined towards vulnerability* (Knowledge Pathing: Multi-, Inter- and Trans-Disciplining in Social Sciences Series, Vol. 3). AOSIS Publishing. ISBN-978-1-991269-12-6. Pages 240. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2024.BK473>

Social Work in the 21st century: Scholarship and praxis reimagined towards vulnerability, edited by Allucia L. Shokane, Annaline Keet and Varoshini Nadesan, is the third volume in the Knowledge Pathing: Multi-, Inter-, and Trans-Disciplining in Social Sciences series. This open access book is a meticulous collection of scholarly contributions that emanated from the 2021 Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) colloquium, which focused on the theme "Pandemics, Poverty, Inequality, and Disability: Social Work in the 21st Century." This timely manuscript, underpinned by critical theoretical scholarship and evidence-based strategies, grapples with the intricacies and complexity of poverty, inequality and vulnerability in contemporary society, specifically assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalised communities. Aptly, multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches that recognise the complex nature of oppression and vulnerability are considered key for transformative social work interventions.

The book addresses several topical themes, but vulnerability appears to be the central organising principle which is explored from several perspectives. The editors and contributors contest conventional and uncritical views of vulnerability and their association with social work; instead, they promote nuanced and ethical approaches that accurately reflect the intricate lived experiences of those at the margins of society. Vulnerability is conceptualised as a structural condition shaped by poverty, inequality and systemic exclusion. Vulnerability is also shrewdly identified as a springboard for empathy and a catalyst for social work's mission to forge transformative interventions that simultaneously alleviate suffering and promote social change.

The book also places a strong emphasis on transformative practices underpinned by social justice and ethics as central tenets of social work. In the light of the unrelenting social

inequalities and oppression that inheres in the daily violation of human rights, social work must reassert its commitment to social justice and social change. The editors assert the mandate of social work not merely to address individual problems, but to aspire towards dismantling oppressive systems and discriminatory structures that create and perpetuate oppression. The conceptualisation of social work ethics in the book extends beyond professional boundaries to include a commitment to social justice. The editors curate a range of discussions on topical issues from diverse perspectives, offering critical analyses of how they impact negatively on individuals, groups and communities at the margins of society.

This book is an invaluable scholarly resource for social workers. First, the intellectual breadth and depth are palpable. The editors present multiple and diverse perspectives that demonstrate the multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary nature of social work. By drawing on insights from education, sociology, public health and policy studies, the contributors challenge orthodox conceptions of oppression and vulnerability. This facilitates nuanced interventions that acknowledge the intricacy of social issues faced by marginalised communities.

Second, the book offers critical conceptions of vulnerability. The editors and contributors challenge the uncritical view of social work service recipients as passive, and instead advocate for the recognition of their capacity for self-determination, as well as their inherent worth and dignity. Such an understanding is crucial for anti-oppressive social work practice with marginalised communities. The book acknowledges the view of vulnerability as a consequence of structural and systemic exclusion, and consequently advocates for transformative social work approaches that address structural inequalities and the systemic oppression that perpetuates the social inequality of the poor majority in South Africa.

Third, the book offers a comprehensive and critical examination of the evolving landscape of social work in South Africa. The editors successfully curate discussions on a range of topics that reflect the dynamic challenges faced by social workers in the 21st century. The respective topics exhibit substantive theoretical insights blended with practical applications, which provides readers with multifaceted perspectives on how social work can address contemporary challenges. The emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration is particularly pertinent, as it aligns with global trends towards integrated social service delivery.

Finally, the book grapples with the notion of critical praxis. Case studies, narratives and examples provided throughout the book demonstrate the varied ways in which social workers can facilitate inclusive and responsive interventions for those oppressed and discriminated against in society. The contributions highlight reflexivity and critical analysis as key to identifying and addressing normative ideologies and environments that underpin everyday social work practice. In addition, the book promotes social action and collective organising, together with the conviction that social service provision should be integrated with liberatory understandings of social issues.

While the book evinces many strengths, there are some areas where the book could be further developed. Though the book excels in its seamless blend of theory and practice, some chapters appear to have a theoretical bias, with limited or no empirical data to advance a more substantive discourse. The inclusion of, for example, case studies could facilitate a more

contextualised discourse on the practice implications of the respective theories. In addition, and notwithstanding the international nature of the profession, social work is inherently context specific. Although relevant as an independent contribution, the inclusion of a scholarly contribution based on social work in the Philippines in a collection of decidedly South African research seems arbitrary. Instead, a comparative analysis with local equivalents could facilitate a more cohesive and indeed relatable contribution. Despite these limitations, the book's contributions to the field of social work are invaluable. The editors and contributors provide a comprehensive view of oppression and vulnerability in ways that challenge existing paradigms and offer critical frameworks for transformative social work practice.

The book offers a timely and critical examination of the evolving role of social work in addressing vulnerability. The volume contributes to the ongoing discourse on social justice and equity, providing both theoretical frameworks and practical strategies for social work. It challenges social workers not only to address the immediate needs of individuals, but also to engage with the broader structures and systems of oppression that shape societal needs. It reasserts social work as a practice that is deeply implicated in questions of justice, solidarity and human dignity. The book's major strength lies in its emphasis on vulnerability, reframing it as a central and transformative focus of social work rather than as a deficit to be remedied. The editors and contributors call for a social work practice that recognises vulnerability as a shared human experience, one that fosters the promotion of empathy, dignity and justice. In addition, the book emphasises the importance of partnerships between social workers, civil society and government agencies in addressing destructive systemic and structural issues that ravage marginal communities.

The book's strong theoretical and empirical foundation should appeal to social work students interested in developing a thorough understanding of social work theory and its applicability to contemporary debates in social work. For social work practitioners, the book's emphasis on reflective practice and advocacy is key to identifying and addressing the normative ideologies and environments within which social work operates and which often result in social work practice becoming more harmful than transformative. Academics and researchers interested in social work theory, vulnerability studies and critical social theories will find the book to be an essential scholarly resource. Its interdisciplinary approach makes it relevant not only to social work, but also to the social science and humanities. Lastly, the focus on structural and systemic oppression, and role of social work in advocating for social justice and human rights, makes the book relevant for social work policy makers and advocates interested in the pursuit of social change. In sum, the book is simply invaluable. It offers critical, inter- and multidisciplinary perspectives on a plethora of challenges facing social work in the 21st century.