

The history of human rights education in Africa and its implications for social work education in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a critical overview of the history of the development of human rights education in Africa and the influence it has on social work education and human rights. The research is based on an in-depth integrative literature review and provides a context for an understanding of human rights education in social work in Africa. This history is part of the history and development of human rights on the continent. The discussion will indicate that Africa was at a disadvantage regarding human rights education from the beginning, as most African countries had adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) only by 2019. In Africa, human rights education has focused on curriculum initiatives, particularly ones incorporating human rights concepts into local schools; by contrast, human rights education for professional groups has been infrequent. As social workers interact with marginalized groups and populations, the profession is very well positioned to advance human rights in Africa, provided that social work education incorporates human rights in the curricula. This article will indicate how the history of human rights education in Africa creates the backdrop of understanding the need for advancing human rights education in social work in Africa.

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Introduction

Social work and human rights can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, the one undivisible from the other (Ife et al., 2022). Social work education therefore also implies human rights education (HRE). Infusing the social work curriculum with human rights, however, does not happen automatically. It requires dedicated efforts from educators (C. M. Giliomee, 2020). Over time, the deliberate inclusion of human rights content in curricula has gained momentum in the West, while this seems not to occur in the same way in African social work education contexts. There may be various reasons for this seeming lesser inclusion of formal human rights education, such as the history of colonial domination and subjugation of African countries by the very proponents of human rights (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019); the already existing African philosophies which speak to the nature

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of human relationships (Ibhawoh, 2007), and the adoption of the African Charter of Peoples' and Human Rights (Banjul Charter) of 1981. This article will focus on the history of formal human rights education in social work education in Africa, on which there is less information (C. M. Giliomee, 2020).

Smith (2014) argues that the way in which developments and events that occurred in the past are comprehended, is determined by which version of history is used to interpret them. Historical development is generally described through chronological listings of events, personalities or laws passed. However, these approaches neglect the interconnection of greater forces that shape individuals' lives, institutions and disciplines (Smith, 2014). Historical moments are better understood when regarded as being related to socio-political, economic contexts and circumstances surrounding peoples' livelihoods and how these are struggled through in social conflicts, which result in changes in wider societal relationships (Smith, 2014). The history of human rights in Africa and HRE in social work unfolds within Africa's socio-economic, political and colonization history. In this article, the history of Africa is interpreted as instrumental to colonial human rights violations on the continent, and the subsequent need for HRE is indicated, especially in the context of social work education.

Munslow (2008) writes that history is a literary construction and is not only about sources. He highlights that 'history as a cultural narrative about the past can never tell us what the past really means' (Munslow, 2008: Abstract). Narratives from and about the past can, however, have various consequences. Osler (2015) asserts that these narratives may trigger action in both the present and future but may also hamper action toward change. It is therefore important to look at Africa's history with reference to human rights as well as the historical development of HRE in Africa and in social work. The article will discuss the latter and culminate in a discussion on how the above-mentioned histories can be of value for social work education, followed by conclusions and recommendations.

Research methodology

This article was based on an integrative literature review (ILR). Snyder (2019) writes that an integrative literature review as a research method aims to assess, critique and synthesize the literature on a research subject in a way that facilitates new perspectives and theoretical frameworks to emerge. Lubbe et al. (2020) add that the integrative literature review method allows the researcher to explore published research evidence about a certain phenomenon through which potential research gaps can be identified. By employing an ILR, various types of evidence collected by numerous methodologies is summarized which provide a broad and more inclusive view of the topic. The author has been engaged in an in depth study of human rights education in social work in Africa via literature and empirical research over the past 6 years. This article reports on the knowledge gained by means of an in depth literature study (IRL). New perspectives emerged from this research, which is discussed throughout the article and outlined in the recommendations part.

Africa's history, the ironic cradle of twenty-first century human rights and human rights education

Ironically, Africa, a continent inhabited by peoples that organized themselves over centuries in societies guided by values that respect human dignity such as *Ubuntu* (a collection of values and practices that people of Africa view as making people and their communities authentic), *Ujamaa* (communities working together and looking after each other) and *Ukama* (relations and familyhood) (Mugumbate et al. 2024) was brutally colonized, a human rights violation which still haunts the continent today.

Human rights' conception in Africa can be traced back to pre-colonial times, but it is not clear if there were any indication of the existence of human rights concepts in ancient African times. It is difficult to locate sources of history of human rights in Africa prior to the enlightenment period, as ancient Africans did not document their history because it was orally transferred. EI-Obaid and Appiagyei-Atua (1996) assert that during Africa's pre-colonial history (up to the early 1800s, ending with European contact during the late 1800's) traditional ethnic communities lived under various socio-political arrangements, also called traditional African political systems. These political systems, ranging from the simple to the complex, embodied elements of human rights and traditional forms of democracy that were embedded in many of the cultures and religions of these communities.

Mwenda (2000, p. 3) explains that in traditional African societies, individuals and communities' sense of duty and responsibilities, was more important than the notion of human rights. The Afrocentric conception of human dignity, which is presented as a valid worldview, can inform the cross-cultural conception of ideas related to human rights. The way in which African communities were traditionally organized, and are currently still functioning, provides an understanding of how respect for human dignity is entrenched in the African worldview (Gelaye, 2021).

Human rights are, however, critiqued as a Western concept that did not originate in Africa and that does not necessarily have a place in the African context (Mutua, 2002). Mende (2021) nevertheless mentions that human rights do not just originate from one homogeneous culture, value system, or religion, but from various heterogenic and pluralistic sources. This implies that the narrative of the Western idea of human rights can be viewed as a 'retrospective teleology' (Bielefeldt, 2007, p. 179).

The well-known proverb 'I am because we are, and because we are therefore, I am' (Cobbah, 1987, p. 320; Flikschuh, 2016, p. 6) reflects the African philosophy of existence. This saying refers to the nature of African social organization, reflecting a cohesiveness which relies on the importance of kinship in the African lifestyle, contrary to the concept of the nuclear family still dominant in Western society (Cobbah, 1987).

Rights and duties within a large African family are organized around four underlying principles, namely respect, responsibility, reciprocity and restraint. Responsibility in a large African family implies that just as an extended family provides a safety net for the individual, it also entails extensive responsibilities toward the family. Reciprocity of generosity is expected, whether it happens in the short or the long term and can even be carried over into the next generation (Flikschuh, 2016).

Communal well-being is vital, and the pursuit of human dignity lies within the group, including both the living and the dead (Cobbah, 1987). A sense of duty

and responsibilities to communities and individuals is seen as of higher importance than human rights per se (Mwenda, 2000). Political rights are intertwined with extended family structures and a consultative relationship with the chief, characterized by checks and balances, ensure that rulers do not become dictatorial.

Regarding the importance of the individual in African societies, EI-Obaid and Appiagyei-Atua (1996) contend that although the African notion of rights is viewed as communitarian, individual rights have also existed in African communities and that their exercise helped to strengthen those societies. The individual is seen as born into humanity, incapable of sufficiently meeting his/her needs, meaning that communalism does not refute individualism, it merely mirrors the limited character of the possibilities of the individual. Ikuenobe (2018) affirms this view when he asserts that fundamental human rights are rooted in an African communal conception of dignity and personhood that emphasizes individual responsibility.

Heyns (2006) mentions that the idea of human rights as it is used in Africa today has strong roots in the struggle against colonialism and the remnants of colonialism. Regrettably, the way of life for people living under traditional African political systems was impaired by the exploitative colonization by Europeans, which initially centered on commercial relations around raw materials and mercantile capitalism (Césaire, 2000). These relations gave birth to the slave trade and escalated to the colonization of Africa because of the mounting demands of European capitalism and imperialism (EI-Obaid & Appiagyei-Atua, 1996).

European colonialism (1800s to the mid-1900s) led to severe ambiguities and transformations in Africa, imposing extensive changes in the socio-political and economic context, specifically related to new boundaries, European legal systems, languages and religions which demonized their African counterparts (EI-Obaid & Appiagyei-Atua, 1996). The new boundaries permanently transformed the geopolitical character of the continent and worsened ethnic divisions, leaving a legacy of arbitrary and negligently drawn crevasses between peoples.

Post-colonial African history (mid-1900s to the late 1980s) was characterized by great disillusionment (Reid, 2011). Initially, it was a period of optimistic transition from European control to national independence, but the post-colonial era was characterized by repression and corruption, resulting in the accumulation of wealth by ruling elites (Wengraf, 2014). The ruling African elite embraced various ideologies (socialism, one-partyism, pro-Americanism, Pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism) the implementation of which was not conducive to upholding people's rights (EI-Obaid & Appiagyei-Atua, 1996).

Contemporary Africa emerged after this period. It was characterized by many misperceptions and contradictions, with the question of human rights and democracy lying at the center of much of the turmoil (EI-Obaid & Appiagyei-Atua, 1996). Aidoo (1993, p. 704) acknowledges that in modern-day Africa the struggle for democracy may also be a struggle for rights, but notes that although it is not possible to have human rights in undemocratic circumstances, democracy does not automatically guarantee human rights (Aidoo, 1993; Manirakiza, 2019).

The African Charter of Human and Peoples Rights (1981), which ushered in an era of regional human rights acknowledgment and compliance, reflects African ideals and

values while not departing from universal standards. A moderate ‘cut and mix’ approach to Western liberal ideas was adopted by the Charter while espousing communitarian ideals. The Charter is thus a combination of civil and political rights, group rights, socio-economic rights, duties and responsibilities (Uwazuruike, 2022).

Because the African Charter of Human Peoples Rights is an essential part of the creation of an African human rights system (Bekker, 2013, p. 1), a brief overview of the conception of the African Charter is provided next.

The African human rights system was guided in by the adoption of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on 28 June 1981, in Nairobi, Kenya, by the OAU Assembly (African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, 2017; Ayeni, 2016; Bekker, 2013). The Charter came into force on 21 October 1986. Initially, all 54 member states of the African Union (AU, previously the OAU), except for South Sudan, were parties to the African Charter (Ayeni, 2016, p. 6). South Sudan, however, became a party to the African Charter in 2013. Currently, only Morocco, a founding member, is not a party to the Charter, due to withdrawing its membership in 1984 because of the dispute over the sovereignty of Western Sahara (African Union, 2024).

The outline of the African Charter reflects a division into three sets of conceptual structures: peoples’ and individual rights; duties of states and individuals (not peoples); and implementation (EI-Obaid & Appiagyei-Atua, 1996). The Committee of Experts that drafted the Charter required that the Charter should reverberate the African conception of human rights, adopting the African philosophy of law as a pattern, while meeting the needs of Africa. In accordance with this requirement, the Charter achieved its uniqueness, which lies in its cultural component and the issue of African development. Unique features such as the relationship between the community and individual rights and assigning duties to the individual, the community and the state are entrenched in the Charter (EI-Obaid & Appiagyei-Atua, 1996).

As its primary supervisory mechanism, the African Charter established the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights and imparts on this Commission both promotional and protective mandates (Ayeni, 2016). This implies that the Charter mandated the Commission to protect and promote the human rights of Africa’s people and peoples, interpret the provisions of the Charter, and execute any other tasks assigned to it by the AU Assembly (Ayeni, 2016). To address a multitude of human rights issues in Africa, the African Charter, Commission and Court are useful tools that also took the African worldview into consideration when they were created, and in the way they function and operate.

In conclusion, the history of human rights from an African worldview outlines the uniqueness of the deep-rooted communitarian values in African society, though not at the expense of the individual, and its implications for the human rights discourse that originated in a Western paradigm. It outlines the possibility that human rights conceptualization, practices and discourse may be beneficial from an African perspective.

Historical development of human rights and human rights education (HRE) in Africa

The history of the provision of HRE in Africa provides a framework for the understanding thereof in social work on the continent and is part of the history and

development of human rights in Africa. Arguably, Africa was at a disadvantage regarding HRE, as initially only Egypt, Ethiopia and Liberia voted for the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. In that year however, most African countries were still under colonial rule, while the Soviet Bloc including the then Union of South Africa, abstained from voting (Horn, 2009).

There were, however, some positive human rights developments in Africa which are not reflected in state reporting. These include new Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa, a declaration on Democracy, [and] Political, Economic and Corporate Governance in Africa and an African Union Covenant on Preventing and Combating Corruption, which the Ministerial Council of the AU agreed to (Horn, 2009).

While Africa has succeeded in ratifying many of the large range of human rights treaties, marginalized populations, society at large and the influential judiciary, have still not embraced and internalized human rights principles completely. In an international study done by Heyns, Viljoen and Murray (2024) on the impact of the United Nations Human Rights Treaties on the domestic level, it was found that in Africa political leadership and contexts are important factors in ratification of UN treaties as well as assimilating treaties into domestic legislation. In countries with political stability and good governance principles from UN treaties are reflected in local legislation. In Senegal for instance, Kane (2024) reports that the government has prioritized the alignment of national legislation with the legal instruments ratified by them. National policy documents are directly linked to the commitments made by the government to ratify UN human rights instruments and supported by a National Action Plan for its implementation. Similarly, Adegalu and Mitchell (2024) write that the UN human rights treaties have a considerable influence on laws, policies and decisions in South Africa as well.

The potential for the continued development of an African human rights culture, more general knowledge of all people's rights (Horn, 2009) as well as an African Human Rights System that is effective and efficient in protecting human rights (Zouapet, 2023) can still be expanded. Social work education in Africa can contribute to advancing a human rights culture and system in Africa, as the people that social workers provide services to are the most marginalized members of their society and they are the most in need of knowledge about their rights. They are, however, often prevented from having the knowledge and opportunity to exercise their rights due to the circumstances in their countries, particularly widespread poverty (Malcolm, 2014).

If human rights education is to gain momentum in Africa, the words spoken by Baxi (1994) in 1994 after the creation of the 1993 Montreal Plan for human rights education remain true. He emphasized that, although the Montreal Plan links human rights and democracy, there must be an effort to acknowledge history, as it has profound consequences for the future of both human rights and human rights education globally. Baxi's (1994) remark is based on his belief that the enduring linkage between human rights and democracy may have appeared to many leaders, particularly to the peoples of the Global South, to be belligerently Eurocentric.

Baxi (1994) recommends that the Montreal Plan be complemented by notions of 'historic' time, because the existing liberal democracies in the Global North developed out of the histories of people's struggles with the state and within civil societies over centuries. It is inconceivable that human rights education strategies in themselves will be able to accelerate historic times for the rest of the world and believing that it can do so

thus disrupts the meaningful global drive toward the goals of human rights education (Baxi, 1994). Baxi (1994, p. 10) warns that the Montreal Plan ‘moves close to heart of contemporary darkness’ when it refocuses human rights education only on its early task of transforming civil society.

Human rights education in the Global South has indeed not developed with the same momentum as in the North. In Africa, human rights education has focused on curriculum initiatives, particularly those incorporating human rights concepts into local schools; however, human rights education for professional groups has been infrequent (Cardenas, 2005). Professional human rights training during earlier times was most likely to be conducted by NGOs, such as those affiliated with the Inter-African Union for Human Rights. By 2005, the main challenge related to human rights education facing the African region appeared to be found technical assistance in the short term and sustained funding in the long term, while building strong regional networks among role players involved in human rights education (Cardenas, 2005). Because human rights education in Africa confronts systemic challenges in the region, such as poverty, illiteracy and political instability, when African states do participate in human rights education, many of these actions are taken under the auspices of national human rights commissions (Cardenas, 2005).

It is argued that Human Rights Education may empower citizens to the extent that they be a threat to some government policies and practices. Cardenas (2005, p. 365) mentions that human rights education enables attempts at change: ‘[S]uccessful members of society may challenge the [S]tate openly, defying potential abusers or demanding punishment of violators and compensation for abuse’.

Following a suggestion of the World Conference, the United Nations General Assembly, in its resolution 49/184 of 23 December 1994, proclaimed the Decade for Human Rights Education commencing on 1 January 1995, ending in 2004 (United Nations, 2004). This decade was followed by three 10-year phases advancing human rights education, each with a unique focus. African participation in the first UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004) was not very substantial (Horn, 2009). It appeared that African governments anticipated intergovernmental organizations to fund human rights education projects. In their opinion, NGOs attributed the obstacles to achieving HRE in Africa to a lack of political will. Horn (2009) asserts that the UN does not have any instruments to evaluate the success of HRE efforts. This implies that although such HRE programmes may exist, it is difficult to determine how successful they really are.

Mubangizi (2015) mentions that civil society in Africa has tended not to succeed in the implementation of HRE programmes to marginalized individuals. Okafor (2007) suggests that this may be because human rights activists are part of an elite that has a specific understanding of the human rights environment, but not necessarily of what Okafor (2007, p. 269) refers to as ‘the language of the marginalized’. These activists therefore identify with the life experiences of the governing elite, rather than with those of marginalized people, and are subsequently unable to bridge the gap between the elite and the have-nots (Horn, 2009). As long as societies in Africa remain poor, there will be a gap not only between rich and poor, but also between those who know their rights and those who do not. This is a challenge for the UN, governments, NGOs, and, ultimately, social workers (Durojaye & Mirugi-Mukundi, 2020).

Horn (2009) maintains that regardless of their shortcomings, NGOs are the main contributors to specialized grass-roots education, and HRE. Governments in Africa are not expected explicitly to take up their mandate on HRE. Therefore, human rights institutions, treaty bodies, civil society, universities, by implication schools of social work as well, will have to take the initiative to effect change regarding HRE in Africa (Horn, 2009; Mubangizi, 2015).

From the above discussion, several references were made to marginalized groups and populations. Since social workers interact with these groups, social work as a profession may be highly effective in advancing human rights in Africa, given that social workers on the continent are adequately trained in human rights (McPherson & Libal, 2019). However, as Baxi (1994) and Cardenas (2005) assert, HRE in Africa has been strongly influenced by the Global North and still needs to be reformed for the African context.

Following the growth rings of the human rights education tree in social work in Africa

HRE's development in Africa can be compared to a young tree with only a few rings. HRE has not been assimilated in curricula on all educational levels and in all areas of work and life in Africa over the last 40 years. Social work as a human rights profession in Africa therefore faces a challenge in defining its role in relation to the reality of massive human rights violations in some African countries (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2014). The origins of these violations may be traced back to the ineradicable imprint of colonialism on the African continent (Sewpaul, 2014). Through colonization traditional African forms of helping and living were decimated and destroyed (Patel, 2015). In traditional African communal and collectivist systems, individuals, families and communities were nurtured and cared for, while supporting the functioning of societies, serving to manage rules and principles of succession and seniority, as well as residence patterns, according to customary law (Kreitzer, 2012). In such a supportive system of societal functioning, there was no need for human rights activism or social work services (Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012).

In relation to the social work profession, colonialism provided the socio-political context and climate in which the practice of social work was established (Mwansa, 2011). From its start, social work in Africa was characterized by case work, group work and community mobilization, specifically executed via rural development for community projects (Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012). The system incorporated the concept of self-help—at the time an approach to community development alongside the social work practice model in Anglophone countries, which was primarily remedial, with departments of social welfare organized to provide material support to those that had less opportunities due to intersectional oppressions (Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012).

Social work in Africa was mainly practised from a Western paradigm with social work education that had its roots firmly in Western textbooks and curricula. Most African academics were trained at universities in the West (Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012). Although social work in Africa was, and in many instances still is, practised from a Western paradigm, social development as a strategy must be distinguished from social work as an end goal (Lombard, 2007, p. 301) in Africa, to achieve the optimal development of

Africa and its peoples. The adoption of a developmental approach to social welfare can therefore be seen as part of the historical development of social work in Africa.

Social development as a strategy and end goal is an approach to social welfare (developmental social welfare) and social work (developmental social work), which has a clear commitment to human rights and social justice. It recognizes the link between human rights, social justice and human freedoms (Lombard, 2014, p. 46). A social right and social justice perspective aligns the developmental approach to social welfare, which assumes that social justice is ‘desirable, definable, and possible’ (Patel, 2015).

Focussing on the more recent past of social work and human rights in Africa, Spitzer and Twikirize (2014) mention that in East Africa, community human rights violations are more severe than ever, with specific reference to the stigmatization of women, children, people with albinism, people that identify as LGBTQI+, certain ethnic groups and other minorities. Spitzer and Twikirize (2014) rightly ask where, in view of these human rights abuses, the voices of social workers in Africa are that are prepared to defend people’s rights and at the same time find a gentle balance between the profession’s dual commitment to advocating for human rights and respecting cultural diversity. To further answer this question, Sewpaul (2014) writes that social workers in Africa can play a facilitative role related to inter-cultural debate, dialogue and constructive confrontation. Although some social workers in Africa in their individual capacities, or in affiliation with progressive civil society organizations, are engaged in challenging various policies related to macroeconomics, health and welfare policies as well as human rights abuses, social work still has not contributed meaningfully enough to the broader human rights discourse in Africa (Sewpaul, 2006). In this regard, Garrett (2024) refers to ‘hr+’ which entails that social work must extend the discourse of human rights by extending the political capacity of its critique to examine its inherent logics and political limits.

The review of the history of social work in Africa with specific reference to human rights confirms that the profession has a human rights history and the developmental approach to social work in Africa is entrenched in human rights and social justice (C. Giliomee & Lombard, 2020). Social workers, however, are not visible enough as human rights activists in Africa. According to Wronka and Staub-Bernasconi (2012) and Wessels (2017), human rights must be a priority for the profession, as they require the legal mandate to fulfil human needs, thus promoting human development. Sewpaul (2016, p. 35) points out that this is not a new idea: she refers to Bertha Reynolds, who in 1936 already warned that if social workers ‘do not stand courageously for all human rights, they will lose their own, including the right to practise their profession as a high and honourable calling’. It can, therefore, be concluded that the history of human rights in social work in Africa differs from its history in the West, as the profession has been practised in a way that violated people’s rights due to the profession’s colonial origins, and still has not been transformed sufficiently.

Kneading human rights education into the African social work curriculum

From the discussion of the history of human rights, HRE and social work education in Africa, it seems important that human rights should be an integral part of the social work curriculum. However, human rights education in an African context must be based in an

African-sensed perspective, arising from, and respecting existing African philosophical traditions that lay the basis for rights for both individuals and peoples. Human rights education is an ever-evolving process and cannot be approached in a superficial way. C. M. Giliomee (2020) found that there are certain factors, some linked to the histories described above, that need to be considered when infusing human rights content into the social work curriculum.

A personal viewpoint

An educator's perception and understanding of human rights, based on his own personal experiences of human rights and human rights violations might influence how that educator teaches about human rights and if and how human rights content will be included in the social work curriculum (C. Giliomee, 2023). Rudd (2022) mentions that social work educators experience their own positions of privilege and oppression. When they begin to acknowledge these experiences and learn about the influence on self and teaching them, they will likely be better able to educate students about oppression and prepare them for employment in the social work field. This process is also applicable to teaching human rights. How a student perceives human rights and how a social worker practices rights-based social work is influenced by the way in which human rights were taught. HRE in social work, therefore, needs to begin with educators exploring their personal histories and how it formed their understanding of human rights and how they teach it. In the same manner, students should be taken on a self-exploration journey to discover their perception and understanding of human rights (C. M. Giliomee, 2020).

A socio-political dilemma

Another finding of C. M. Giliomee's (2020) research clearly indicates that a country's specific socio-political context can pose challenges to social work educators teaching human rights, specifically if the country's laws embed human rights violations. This is, for example, the case in Uganda that have accepted anti-GBTQ+ legislation, enacted in 2023 (Bosire, 2023). The implication of this law for social work educators teaching human rights in Uganda is severe. Although it might be that an educator supports the law, others may not, and students may not. Yet, speaking out against it might pose dangerous consequences for those educators and students. Social work educators can therefore find themselves in a position where they cannot freely discuss human rights violations.

A curricular challenge

As was discovered in C. M. Giliomee's (2020) study, the integration of human rights content in the curriculum is a complex issue. Students should for instance be familiarized with the history of human rights in Africa and how communal values and practices to enhance human dignity can be used in social work practice. They can do research on local history and the human rights implications thereof can be interpreted and discussed in class. McPherson (2023) writes that it is imperative for students to learn about both the heroic human rights work that social workers have

done in the past, and their contribution to human rights violations and the effects thereof. The inclusion of Indigenous people's voices in social work in Africa can further enhance anti-colonial human rights education through their lived experiences. The latter can be shared through indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance (Perumal et al., 2024). Sium and Ritskes (2013, p. 5) explain that 'stories are decolonisation theory in its most natural form.' The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples, including their right to self-determination, cultural preservation and land rights. Mwapaura et al. (2024) state that the interplay between indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and human rights is based on their shared goals of promoting dignity, well-being and justice. By including IKS in human rights education in social work curricula across Africa, a framework for recognizing and safeguarding IKS as an anti-colonial strategy can be established.

Human rights-based social work practice training: putting service users first

Social work is acknowledged as a human rights profession universally (Ife, 2001). This entails employing HRE to train social workers as practitioners that understand the origins of human rights and what it means to always uphold service users' rights. Not only should social workers practice from a human rights paradigm, but they are also frontline educators of human rights. This implies that they should ensure that service users and communities know their own rights and responsibilities and how to engage with it. During 2023, I conducted six group work sessions with young female adults, residing in a group home supporting them to make the transition from school to the life of work. The theme for the sessions focused on getting to know your rights and responsibilities. I began the first session with a discussion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948. I was surprised that they did not know about the UDHR, nor about the events of World War II that ultimately culminated in the birth of the UDHR. They were also surprised to learn that there is a Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of 1979. Only the knowledge of the existence of this convention was already extremely empowering to them as young women. In view of this experience, I realized that imparting human rights knowledge also serves as enhancing and valuing human dignity, one of Androff's (2016) five principles of rights-based social work practice.

Necessity to train social work educators in human rights education

The assumption may be made that since social work is a human rights profession, educators will automatically know how to integrate human rights content in their curriculum and teaching. Nothing can, however, be further away from the truth. In C. M. Giliomee's (2020) research she found that schools of social work in some instances include human rights content in the curriculum on an ad hoc basis, thus when needed. There is no deliberate planning for how and where human rights content will be infused in the curriculum. Educators further indicated that the integration of human rights content in their curricula depends on the subject matter,

but also very much on the interests and discretion of the specific lecturer. This situation indicates the need for training of social work educators in HRE, and specifically a stronger focus on how to develop an Afro-sensed approach to human rights content in the curriculum.

Conclusion and implications

History provides a lens through which the present can be understood. By exploring human rights, and human rights education in social work's history in Africa, the value of African communal systems' emphasis on preserving human dignity became clear. The exploration, however, also revealed the gross human rights abuses that the continent suffered because of colonialism. The African Declaration of Human and Peoples' Rights, based on African values, was outlined and can be a valuable source for teaching human rights at schools of social work in Africa. Another conclusion is that HRE in social work in Africa must still develop more and should shed its colonial character. This can be done by infusing human rights content in the social work curriculum, reaffirming the local context. As Africa's post-colonial history indicated, the socio-political context of countries, and how it influences social work education and educators, needs to be understood and interpreted for social work practice. As we immerse ourselves in the history of human rights and HRE in Africa, we must strive to remove the dead trees that colonialism left, we must plant new human rights trees that will provide the shade of human dignity and human rights enjoyment to all Africans and subsequently grow the social work profession, a forest that is created through human rights trees.

Recommendations—growing the human rights tree

To grow the African human rights tree successfully, dedicated training programmes for social work educators in this field will make a noteworthy difference. This training should address aspects such as the creation of an awareness among educators regarding their personal beliefs, viewpoints and experiences related to human rights and human rights violations; exposure to relevant human rights literature and information and how to include and use formal human rights documents in teaching and learning; how to source, develop and use locally relevant examples related to human rights for educational purposes; how to build and create a culture of human rights within the particular school of social work; and how to facilitate a teaching and learning environment where students can learn how to create a culture of human rights in the contexts in which they are practising as students and will practise in future as professional social workers.

More local literature on human rights that include the history of human rights in Africa, should be developed. Social work educators should do human rights research in local African contexts. In that way, they can develop study material and publications with a specific focus on human rights education at schools of social work. The best practice

case examples should be documented and used to equip students to engage in rights-based social work practice, based on the local and historical African context.

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