

*The Tensions Between Culture and Human Rights: Emancipatory Social Work and Afrocentricity in a Global World*, edited by Vishanthie Sewpaul, Linda Kreitzer and Tanusha Raniga

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## Introduction

The recently published book, *The Tensions Between Culture and Human Rights: Emancipatory Social Work and Afrocentricity in a Global World*, edited by Vishanthie Sewpaul, Linda Kreitzer and Tanusha Raniga, explores and interrogates the relationship between culture and human rights and contextualises it across a few countries in Africa. It demonstrates the fact that Africa is not a homogenous society and that there are multitudes of cultures across and in countries in Africa. The book sets out to explore the “tension” between culture and rights, and indeed this tension is apparent throughout. Some authors were rightfully critical about the negative impact of cultural practices on human rights; whereas others accommodated these cultural practices with the hope that the perpetrators of these violations would see the error of their ways and change their belief system.

The introduction to the book by Vishantie Sewpaul and Linda Kreitzer (pp. 1–24) provides essential reading, as it sets the book context for the reader, which is not explicit in every chapter. This includes colonialism and its impact on people’s cultures, which were often annihilated in that process, the impact of Eurocentrism and imperialism on nations in Africa, and the ways in which these continue to plague nations across the continent through growing inequality and poverty. The links between human rights violations, culture and poverty are illustrated by the statement made by Frans Fanon: “The poverty of the people, national oppression and the inhibition of culture are one and the same thing” (p. 5). The introduction also sets the scene for Afrocentrism and ubuntu.

This centres Africa in the current discourses and provides some of the key foundational aspects and principles underpinning Afrocentric principles.

This book is one of the first I have come across that deals with human rights within an African context. It therefore serves our decoloniality agenda, which includes untangling the production of knowledge from a Eurocentric framework and provides the opportunity to relearn and reclaim that which was discarded by colonialism and racial capitalism.

The conclusion chapter mentions emancipatory social work, although too briefly. Emancipatory social work is arguably the key to unravelling sources of oppression and confronting structural sources of “poverty, inequality, marginalisation, oppression and exclusion” (Flem et al. 2021, 4). It is about giving real meaning to social justice in all its forms, as one of the key values of social work.

## Synopsis of the Book’s Content

The book comprises 12 chapters that each provide an overview of a cultural practice in a specific country and the ways in which this practice has an impact on the human rights of a group of people. In doing this, it lays bare the realities of these harmful practices in specific countries. It then describes some ways social workers in that country can deal with these human rights violations. By so doing, it provides a good example of contextualised social work, which is non-Western, localised and considers the cultural practices and nuances in that country in seeking solutions. It further calls on social workers to be culturally sensitive and to play the role of cultural mediators in managing the tension between human rights and the cultural violation of these rights.

Chapter 1 by Vishantie Sewpaul, Manqoba Victor Mdamba and Boitumelo Seepamore (pp. 25–46) explores the custom of ilobolo which is the amount (cash or in kind) that a prospective husband gives to his prospective wife’s family in a customary marriage. The chapter focuses on ilobolo in the context of isiZulu-speaking people in KwaZulu-Natal, a province in South Africa. It looks at the commodification of ilobolo and its detrimental effects on women and children.

Chapter 2 by Augusta Yetunde Olaore, Julie Drolet and Israel Bamidele Olaore (pp. 47–66) describes marital-cultural practices in Nigeria and the ways in which these violate the rights of women. These practices affect widowhood, inheritance and property rights.

Chapter 3 by Boitumelo Seepamore and Vishantie Sewpaul (pp. 67–84) discusses the issue of domestic workers, who are often not able to raise their own children because they live on the property of their employers or rent a room near to their workplaces and cannot be with their children. It explores interesting concepts about mothering, other

mothering and distant mothering. This study took place in a municipality in Durban, a South African city in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Chapter 4 by Jacob Rugare Mugumbate and Mel Gray (pp. 85–104) explores the misrepresentation of people with epilepsy in Harare, Zimbabwe. It considers the ways in which the rights of people with epilepsy are violated, leading to a lack of educational opportunities, medical facilities and other public social welfare services for people with epilepsy.

Chapter 5 by Alice Boatend and Cynthia A. Sottie (pp. 105–124) discusses the ways in which women and children are exposed to harmful cultural practices in Ghana. It looks at traditions such as widowhood, widow inheritance, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), female ritual bondage and early marriage. It explores the conflict between these practices as cultural traditions and the violation of human rights in these practices.

Chapter 6 by Yania Seid-Mekiye and Linda Kreitzer (pp. 125–146) looks at the intersection between culture, the Islamic religion and women's rights in Ethiopia. This chapter also looks at polygamous marriages, property and inheritance rights, and the way in which the Quran is often misinterpreted by men, who use it to justify patriarchy and the oppression of women.

Chapter 7 by Shahana Rasool (pp. 147–164) explores patriarchal culture in South Africa and the way in which this often prevents women from seeking help from abusive relationships.

Chapter 8 by Munyaradzi Muchacha, Abel Blessing Matsika and Tatenda Nhapi (pp. 165–182) discusses child marriage among the apostolic sects in Zimbabwe. It looks at the factors that support child marriages from a cultural or traditional perspective and the violation of children's rights through practising this tradition.

Chapter 9 by Ziblim Abukari (pp. 183–208) considers child protection laws in Ghana against the traditional notions and beliefs about children and child labour.

Chapter 10 by Paul Bukuluki (pp. 209–236) deals with the issue of FMG/C in Sudan, the controversy surrounding these practices, the medicalisation of FMG/C and the violation of human rights.

Chapter 11 by Paul Bukuluki, Ronard Mukuye, Ronald Luwangula, Aloysious Nnyombi, Juliana Naumo Akoryo and Eunice Tumwebaze (pp. 237–254) looks at HIV, AIDS and gender-based violence (GBV) in Uganda. It argues that there is a link between culture, HIV, AIDS and GBV, and that positive cultural practices could be used to decrease the prevalence of HIV, AIDS and GBV.

Chapter 12 by Poloko Nuggert Ntshwarang and Vishanthie Sewpaul (pp. 255–272) deals with corporal punishment as a deeply entrenched practice in Botswana and the implications of this on the human rights of children.

## Critical Review of the Book

This book demonstrates that culture can be used to protect the rights of individuals, groups and communities to express their own humanity, their own world view and the way in which they make meaning of their culture. These are cultural practices that should be affirmed and celebrated, which contrasts sharply with looking at culture from a Western Eurocentric and colonised view, in which cultures were destroyed in the name of progress and development.

Despite the affirmation of African cultural practices, there are many practices in an African context that have been criticised because they do not respect the human rights and dignity of vulnerable groups. This book therefore asks the overriding question: “How does an authentic commitment to Afrocentricity serve as a guiding principle in stemming the abuse of human rights in the name of culture?”

Human rights and social justice are core to the social work profession. Throughout the chapters, there is a drawing together of implications for social work and conclusions and recommendations that can be used in classroom teaching, practice settings as well as helping to create social policies that better serve the needs of society. Mostly this involves social workers creating awareness in local settings, empowering women and advocating changes at individual, community and societal levels. These point to key strengths of the book.

However, the key messages of the book could have been strengthened and enhanced. The book is clearly women-centred or gender-focused, with most of the chapters being about culture and its impact on women. Indeed, eight of the 12 chapters are about the ways in which culture has an impact on and negatively affects women, three are about the ways in which culture has an impact on the rights of children, and one is about a health-related issue (people with epilepsy).

Given the strong focus on women, gender theory and gender relations should have been more explicitly stated in the conceptualisation of the book. Gender relations are critical aspects of culture, because they shape the way women are viewed by society and have an impact on the daily lives of women in the family and community. These points are clearly made in the individual chapters, as they narrate human rights abuses in the name of culture and in relation to women. Women have less personal autonomy, fewer resources at their disposal and have limited influence over the decisions that shape their own lives and that of the broader society.

Despite various national and international instruments that are meant to protect and promote the human rights of individuals and communities, violations of these rights in the name of culture continue to be perpetuated against women and children, who bear the brunt of most of the harmful practices. This is mostly shaped by the dominant patriarchal culture, in which men hold more socio-economic and political power both in the home and in society and which is practiced across most countries and cultures. A challenge of existing power relations is critical therefore in reconstructing gender ideologies. The difficulty, however, is that these ideologies are embedded in social and cultural ideas that perpetuate human rights violations against women.

In discussing the tensions between cultural diversity and human rights, some authors convey a concerning need to “find a middle ground with regard to universalism, cultural diversity and cultural relativism” (Bukuluki, p. 212). Bukuluki’s chapter speaks about “human rights being translated into action in culturally sensitive ways” (p. 213). It appears to propose an approach that reduces the harm caused by FGM/C, rather than eliminating the practice because it violates the human rights of women and girls. Similarly, Boateng and Sottie (p. 118) reflect that “though these practices [FGM/C] are generally held to be harsh, cruel, senseless and archaic, they cannot just be abandoned”, and propose that we understand the genesis of and the meaning that groups attach to these practices.

These sentiments can be easily construed as cultural preservation until the perpetrators of these practices can be convinced otherwise. Respecting cultural diversity cannot happen when it inflicts harm and violates human rights. It cannot be used as an excuse and a smokescreen for the continuation of a patriarchal culture that erodes the dignity, liberty and freedom of others. Different chapters refer to social workers’ commitment to respect cultural diversity, but that this must be balanced against adherence to universal human rights values and practices. This balance is noted in the conclusion chapter as the universal–relativist debate.

An Afrocentric approach is surely necessary to deal with hundreds of years of colonisation and Eurocentrism. It is culturally grounded and seeks to affirm the cultural experiences of people of African descent and to redress the internalisation of inferiority of African peoples. It also “affirms the co-existence of all cultures and examines how power and privilege are played out in global political, economic and multicultural arenas” (Sewpaul and Kreitzer, p. 7). From a decolonial perspective, this is critical; however, from an emancipatory perspective, Afrocentrism cannot succeed without a deep understanding of patriarchy as a powerful system that transcends culture in all its diversities. It also cannot succeed without emancipatory social work as the guiding praxis.

We must be careful therefore that, in rightly denouncing colonialism and Eurocentrism as intrusive and disruptive, we do not see Afrocentrism as the panacea to redress human rights violations in the name of culture. Afrocentrism is an approach to the study of the

world; it presents a world view that is based on values and principles different to those of Eurocentrism, and it remains a critical world view to spur on cultural and political activism. However, cultural, traditional and religious practices that are harmful to women and children are so deeply ingrained in the psyche of communities who condone, continue and justify these practices that a complete overhaul of a patriarchal system that denies women and children these fundamental rights is required. This cannot be done through negotiation and mediation, just like poverty eradication cannot be negotiated within a capitalist system.

The conclusion chapter by Vishanthie Sewpaul and Linda Kreitzer (pp. 273–296) draws on both Afrocentricity and emancipatory social work. However, the book foregrounds Afrocentricity and has not gone far enough in championing emancipatory social work, which is necessary to engage in real transformational work that identifies and challenges the structural causes of advantage and privilege. It is an emancipatory praxis that would heighten critical consciousness and lead to critical actions. Sewpaul et al. (2015, 55) note that “to emancipate means to free ourselves from the shackles of historical, masculine, cultural and political domination; to authentically connect with ourselves and with others; and to examine and re-examine our common sense, taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves, and the world around us”. It is this emancipation that is necessary to redress human rights violations in the name of culture, while still using an Afrocentric perspective.

## Conclusion

The book is aptly titled, as it certainly explores the inherent tensions that are evident in the chapters narrating the different stories about culture and human rights violations, mainly against women and children. Although the chapters propose solutions for social work, they also present further challenges, because they rightfully acknowledge that there can be no formulaic answers. Each context will require different methods and approaches to redress these cultural human rights violations.

Having emancipatory social work as the foundation in these endeavours, however, means that social workers become activists for change even within different cultural contexts. Emancipatory social work also recognises that real change cannot be brought about alone. Social workers therefore need to work together to build organisations or movements at local level that can mobilise communities to act, and then join larger social movements to overhaul the capitalist and patriarchal system that has created these cultural violations of human rights. It is this activism that is necessary for social workers to give meaning to many of the values that are encompassed in the social work profession, such as social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity. This, together with reclaiming the true spirit of ubuntu and Afrocentric principles which emphasise “people participation, communitarianism, non-exploitative development, national self-reliance, freedom, equality and national unity” (Sewpaul and

Kreitzer, 278), could help start rebuilding the foundations of a society characterised by respect, human dignity, compassion, solidarity and consensus.

## References

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